

A HOMILETIC APPROACH ON DEATH & DYING FOR AGING CHRISTIANS

A THESIS

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To that generation of saints
upon whose shoulders my generation stands.

It lies upon the minister of Christ
to care for the souls of his people from house to house;
to spare no pains that divine service be beautiful and reverent;
to afford to the young every useful means of religious culture;
to move his congregation unto such good works as lie to their hand:
but it is well for him to remember that the most critical
and influential event in the religious week is
the sermon.

—Rev. John Watson, *The Cure of Souls*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an instructional resource to teach Christian ministers how to communicate a biblical message that will comfort older Christians suffering through multiple losses associated with the dying process. The thesis contains an exegetical and theological study related to suffering and dying, an overview on the nature and experience of suffering, and important considerations when preaching to older Christians. Also included is a three-part teaching guide with lesson outlines, handouts, quizzes and course evaluation form. Lastly, the thesis contains results and analysis from a live teaching of a portion of the material.

CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength fourscore;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

—Psalm 90:10 (RSV)

Richard Baxter said he preached “as a dying man to dying men.”¹ I’m thirty-seven; many of my congregants are seventy-five. Dying seems a nearer reality for them than for me. I’m dying, but I don’t expect to die soon. The average life expectancy for an American is 77.8,² and that is not merely a statistic to my older church members - it’s their reality. They have already lost their parents, uncles and aunts. Now their friends are dying. Their siblings are dying. Their spouses are dying. With each death, they witness the losses and suffering that is part of the dying process. Each separation reminds them of their own mortality, and more than a few members of my congregation will soon enter that final and difficult phase of life: dying.

What do you say to senior believers on the experience of suffering in the dying process? In my fourth year as pastor of an older congregation, I observed that my physical health had not changed. Yet, in those same four short years, the health of a good number of my congregants rapidly deteriorated; more than a few grew gravely ill and died. I then realized I was not confident in my ministry to those who were in the

¹ Clyde E. Fant and William M. Pinson, eds., *A Treasury of Great Preaching: An Encyclopedia of Preaching*, vol. 2 (Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1995), 238.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “National Center for Health Statistics, Fast Stats A to Z, Life Expectancy” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lifexpec.htm> (accessed February 27, 2009).

final stage of life. I wanted to withdraw, but given my vocation, I had to continue to engage - yet I was not exactly sure what contribution I could make. I wasn't sure what to say, and yet, I felt I was expected to be able to supply a word that could grant a measure of grace or courage, something that would alleviate the suffering. As C. Charles Bachmann makes clear, "In times of grief the pastor's own personality, feelings, or attitudes toward death, grief, and the grief sufferer will either handicap or enhance his ability to be part of the helping process."³ For ministers who, like myself, have felt their weakness in this area of ministry, this thesis is intended to be a source of help.

Arthur Becker says, "If we ask older people, or for that matter almost anyone, what it is about death that is feared most, we frequently find that it is not death, but dying that is feared."⁴ As one who has not experienced the process of dying and likely will not experience it for many years, what message from God's Word can I communicate to those in my pastorate who are dying? What should be said and done to best address and attempt to minimize the suffering they will endure?

Christoffer H. Grundmann, hospital chaplain and Professor in Religion and the Healing Arts at Valparaiso University, noticed through his research a change in the general attitude toward life which says life will go on and on without end. Grundmann says that the deathbed does not "fit well into such an image as prosperity, happiness, and success."⁵ When the end approaches and the last bit of life's journey becomes painful, many do not have the means to deal with their circumstances. They have not

³ C. Charles Bachmann, *Ministering to the Grief Sufferer*, Successful Pastoral Counseling Series (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 26.

⁴ Arthur H. Becker, "Pastoral Theological Implications of the Aging Process," *Journal of Religion and Aging* 2, no. 3 (1986): 20.

⁵ Christoffer H. Grundmann, "To Be with Them: A Hospital Chaplain's Reflection of the Bedside Ministry to Terminally Ill and Dying People," *Christian Bioethics* 9, no. 1 (2003): 80.

prepared for dying, and so they do not know how to respond, especially when the suffering is great.⁶ Grundmann says, "it is becoming more and more popular to advocate physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia."⁷ Ira R. Byock reflects, "There is a tendency within contemporary culture and reflected in medical practice to assume that on receipt of a terminal diagnosis meaningful life has ended."⁸

Can the preacher offer an alternative word on what is to be gained in the last stages of life? If he is to do so, much time will be required to research and learn what needs to be said and how best say it, especially to Christians in their seventies, eighties and nineties. This is one reason why this problem deserves the amount of time and attention required of a thesis-project.

Another reason why this problem warrants deeper study is because in thirty or more years of ministry, a pastor will spend much time in hospitals and nursing homes with older church members and will witness their decline, and they will share loss upon loss. Bachmann says, "The pastor, of all the helping specialists, stands in a unique relationship to the grief sufferer. He still has uninvited access and entrée to the homes of his parishioners and is expected to call."⁹ Sunday after Sunday, the pastor will have to ascend the platform and look dying saints in the eyes; knowing that what they want to hear, what they need to hear, is a word from God that makes their suffering bearable, a word that offers some meaning or benefit to the suffering. This study is needed

⁶ Grundmann, "To Be with Them: A Hospital Chaplain's Reflection of the Bedside Ministry to Terminally Ill and Dying People," 80.

⁷ Grundmann, "To Be with Them: A Hospital Chaplain's Reflection of the Bedside Ministry to Terminally Ill and Dying People," 80.

⁸ Ira R. Byock, "The Nature of Suffering and the Nature of Opportunity at the End of Life," *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine* 12, no. 2 (1996), <http://courses.washington.edu/bh518/Articles/thenatureofsuffering.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2011).

⁹ Bachmann, *Ministering to the Grief Sufferer*, 25.

because the nature of a pastor's work puts him in direct contact with men and women who are in the winter of their lives.

A third reason why the problem warrants significant study is because, in order to share a message that will minister, a pastor needs to understand the causes, concerns and needs of older Christians as they approach death. Without such knowledge, how can a pastor communicate an appropriate message? Henry Ward Beecher said,

What would you think of a physician in the household who has been called to minister to a sick member of some family, and who says, "Well, I will leave something or other; I don't know; what shall I leave?" and he looks in his saddle-bags to see what he has yet got the most of, and prescribes it with no directions; the father, mother, and children may all take a little, and the servants may have the rest. Another physician, and a true one, comes, and the mother says, "Doctor, I have called you in to prescribe for my child." He sits down and studies the child's symptoms; traces them back to the supposed cause; reflects how he shall hit that case, and what remedial agents are supposed to be effective, what shall be the form of administration, how often; he considers the child's temperament and age, and he adapts himself to the special necessity of the individual case.¹⁰

So that God's minister can communicate a helpful word, this thesis will attempt to highlight the needs and concerns of older adults who are nearing ever closer to death.

This project would help to fill, as William J. Carl, Jr. called it, "the need for an informed homiletic in terms of preaching to older adults."¹¹ As such, the project will be a helpful homiletical resource specifically for pastors, chaplains, and deacons, as well as Christians who work in the medical field as doctors, nurses, and caregivers.

Younger ministers looking for a resource on how to preach effectively to their older congregation will find the project of value. The project would be a ready-made

¹⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1872), 8.

¹¹ William J. Carl, *Graying Gracefully: Preaching to Older Adults* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Pr, 1997), 1.

resource to help them acquire the knowledge and skills to better communicate to their older congregants.

Chaplains, too, sit at bedsides and deliver chapel messages. A chaplain or chaplaincy organization could adopt and adjust the teaching plan of the project to their specific needs. Chaplains could share with the hospital's medical staff a few insights on how to respond and communicate to their patients.

Older adults deal with all sorts of issues, but dying and the suffering accompanying it are common denominators. They are unavoidable experiences and, thus, an unavoidable ministry of the pastor. Pastors and other Christian ministers need resources that will help them to address these problems from a biblical perspective. This project purposes to do just that.

So what does the Bible say about God's response to human suffering? Chapter Two begins with an exegetical study addressing the questions: "How does God respond to the believer's suffering?" and, "Can meaning or benefit be found in the experiencing of suffering near death?" The chapter continues by taking up two theological questions pertinent to God's ability to respond to and identify with our suffering: "Is it possible for God to suffer?" and, "Did Christ suffer in his divine nature?"

Chapter Three's overview of extra-biblical literature is divided into three sections. The first explores the nature of suffering and seeks to define what it is to suffer. The second section offers insight on how best to respond to suffering, while the third addresses effective ways to preach to older Christians.

Because the material is intended to be taught, a teaching guide is provided in Chapter Four. Each of the three lessons includes a teaching outline, a handout and a quiz. Also provided is a course evaluation form.

Finally, Chapter Five is an analysis and evaluation of a live teaching of a portion of the material. This chapter provides ideas and insights on what to include and what to avoid when teaching the material.

CHAPTER 2

EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I remember the days of old,
I meditate on all that thou hast done;
I muse on what thy hands have wrought.
I stretch out my hands to thee;
my soul thirsts for thee like a parched land.

—Psalm 143:5-6 (RSV)

The Bible associates suffering with a number of life circumstances: punishment for sin, persecution, disease, war, and loss, among others. The theological problem with suffering is that, while God allows suffering, He is also the One believers seek for help and comfort in those same times of suffering. This paper does not ask, "Why does a sovereign and good God allow circumstances of suffering?" Rather, this thesis focuses on the encouragement and comfort God gives to believers and the benefit believers receive in suffering, particularly older believers, as they suffer near death and while dying.

Pastors need to be able to preach a word of strength and comfort to all of God's people, but especially to those who are suffering manifold losses as they approach death. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a biblically based theological foundation to assist in that effort by addressing such questions as: How does God respond to the believer's suffering? Can meaning or benefit be found in the experience of suffering near death?

Reams of exegetical work have been written from Bible passages related to suffering and death. However, only two passages have been selected for the purpose of

this thesis-project. They have been selected for two primary reasons. First, both passages deal directly with the topic of suffering at the point of death. For example, the Corinthian passage was chosen because Paul wrote those words as he reflected upon the comfort he received from God the Father when he suffered even to the point of wanting to die. As for the Philippians passage, Paul wrote it while in prison under a capital charge - he wrote this letter actually believing that he may soon die. In the words of Charles R. Erdman, "Paul was under the deepening shadow of impending death."¹

Second, the biblical truths contained in these passages address some of the primary needs seniors have as they suffer from the losses associated with the dying experience as addressed later in Chapter Four. For example, many seniors suffer from loss of relationships and at times feel abandoned as they near death. Paul tells the Corinthians that even in the worst kind of suffering, God is always present and continuously comforting his people. Another need those who are suffering have, also addressed in Chapter Four, is for their suffering to have some benefit or meaning. Both passages, and particularly the Philippians passage, teach that there is great gain in suffering. Paul tells the Philippians that, as the attachments of earth are stripped away, a growing attachment to Christ can be gained.

How Does God Respond to the Believer's Suffering?

Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

(3)Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (4)who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we

¹ Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster press, 1932), 18.

ourselves are comforted by God. (5)For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

–2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Paul had suffered much in Asia, so severely that he says he “despaired even of life.”² Those hardships were further compounded because of the painful relationship that existed between him and the Corinthian church. David E. Garland describes Paul’s recent circumstances saying, “In Asia his life was seriously threatened; in Corinth his relationship with the church was seriously threatened. Paul has to deal with difficult external circumstances and a difficult church. Feeling imperiled in Ephesus and unwelcome in Corinth, he went to Troas and later to Macedonia where he writes this letter.”³ Paul was a man who knew what it was to suffer; therefore, he was a man who knew how God responds to the believer’s suffering.

Paul lifted up a blessing to God the Father and to Jesus Christ and proclaimed to the Corinthians that, in every distressful circumstance, God continuously came alongside him, strengthening and encouraging him. Though Paul was rejected and abandoned by others, the Father never left him. Through the suffering, Paul learned that God alone, and not anything else upon the earth or in the earth, is the source of all comfort.

Why did Paul offer a blessing to God for what He had done in his [Paul’s] life, instead of his typical style of thanking God for what He was doing in the life of the church to whom he writes? One obvious reason is that Paul was truly thankful to God for comforting him in terrible circumstances. Paul’s blessing then acted as a source of

² 2 Cor 1:8 (NASB).

³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 29.

encouragement to Christians in Corinth who may be in crisis. Paul was also thankful that God not only comforted him but also delivered him from such great peril.⁴

The blessing may also have had rhetorical purposes. First, though the tension in his relationship with the Corinthians had eased somewhat, Paul knew some bitterness still remained. Furthermore, Paul knew that some in the church still questioned his authority and even his apostleship. Other religious leaders continued to try to convince the church to stop listening to him. "Paul therefore continues to defend his integrity and authority in this letter," says Garland, "and he focuses the blessing period on himself as part of his tactics to win back their full confidence and support."⁵ By use of the blessing, Paul was making it clear that the Lord was with him and helping him, therefore the church should heed what Paul had to say.

A second rhetorical purpose of the blessing may be to "first win the readers' sympathy and support before shifting into the attack mode against those outsiders who have sabotaged his relationship with the church and those few who continue in their defiance."⁶ Later in the letter, Paul addressed the personal criticisms from his attackers.

Though it is most probable that Paul did use the blessing as a rhetorical device to prepare his readers for what would follow, this does not diminish the truth of what he wrote. Paul's blessing was true and sincere. The blessing is an authoritative word on how God responds to his people when they suffer. For this reason, the passage is most applicable to a thesis whose purpose is to help ministers share a message that is of help to those who suffer.

⁴ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 53.

⁵ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 54.

⁶ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 55.

God Is the Source of All Comfort

According to C.K. Barnett, the Hebrew word, *baruk*, when used in the Old Testament generally and specifically in the Psalms, is often rendered *eulogêtos* in the Greek. In English, both *baruk* and *eulogêtos* are translated "blessed." *Eulogêtos* is the Greek word that Paul used to begin verse three.⁷ It would appear that Paul wanted to make sure his readers understood that the God of the Old Testament, the God who is *baruk*, is the same God who is the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." As Barnett says, "This is not surprising since it expresses the fundamental conviction that Jesus signifies not the contradiction but the fulfillment of the faith of the Old Testament and of Judaism."⁸ It is the God of the Old Testament who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and He is to be blessed.

Paul's use of the Greek *pater* (father) connotes *origin*, and his *ōiktirmōn* (mercies) means *compassionate, merciful, of tender mercy*.⁹ Here Paul intends to make it clear that God is the One from whom compassion originates, the One in whom mercy finds its beginning.

Not only is God the source of compassion, He is also the one from whom all comfort originates. Philip E. Hughes says that this

God of ours is "the God of all comfort", that is, the divine fount of all consolation to His people—the "all" both excluding any other source of comfort and also emphasizing the complete adequacy of that comfort for every circumstance that may arise (cf. Phil. 4:19). No suffering, however severe, can separate the believer from the tender care and compassion of his Heavenly Father.¹⁰

⁷ C. K. Barnett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 59.

⁸ Barnett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 59.

⁹ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1990), 51.

¹⁰ Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, vols., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 11.

Rudolf Bultmann supports Hughes' interpretation that all mercy and comfort originate with God: "If God is described as Father and God of mercies and comfort, that of course does not mean primarily that he is merciful and gives comfort, but that all mercy and comfort have their origin in him, that he is the one, 'from whom come mercy and comfort.'"¹¹ This is not a new revelation; when the LORD hid Moses in the cleft of the rock, He passed by Moses and said of Himself, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth..."¹²

At the beginning of verse four Paul writes, "who comforts us in all our affliction..."¹³ Again, the word translated here as *comfort* is the Greek *paraklēsis*. Paul used this word, along with its verb form *parakalein* and its compound *sunparakalein*, more often than any other New Testament writer.¹⁴ Hughes says,

The word "comfort", whether as a noun or a verb, occurs no less than ten times in verses 3 to 7, building up a characteristically Pauline manner a compelling impression of the comfort which God bestows upon His children. Paul employs the term here in its basic (Greek) sense of standing beside a person to encourage him when he is undergoing severe testing.¹⁵

The first part of *paraklēsis*, the word *para*, means *from beside*,¹⁶ the second part is *kaleō*, which means *to call*.¹⁷ This gives a better idea of how God comforts: God is with us, near us, beside us, and He comforts us with His words. God who is near speaks to

¹¹ Rudolf Bultmann and Erich Dinkler, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 1st English language ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1985), 22.

¹² Exod 34:6.

¹³ 2 Cor 1:4.

¹⁴ Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 109.

¹⁵ Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 11.

¹⁶ Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 54.

¹⁷ Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 39.

us and his words comfort us. Jesus called the Holy Spirit, "The (Paraclete) Comforter," whose work is to teach and lead us and, in this sense of the word, to encourage us with words of comfort.

As stated above, the word Paul uses for "comforts" has its roots in *paraklēsis*. However, in verse four Paul uses the present tense form *parakaleô*, which communicates a continual or ongoing action. Thus, Alfred Plumber translates this phrase 'who comforts us' to be 'Who continually comforts us.'¹⁸ Plumber elaborates, God comforts us "not once or twice, but always; the *παράκλησις* [*paraklēsis*] is without break."¹⁹ Ernest R. Campbell translates it, "the one comforting."²⁰ He explains that the text "basically means that God was *continually exhorting Paul* and his associates, thereby encouraging and comforting them in every 'affliction' (*θλίψει*), *tight squeeze* and *distressful situation*."²¹ Thus, God the Father is always in the act of comforting His afflicted children.

The Greek word Paul used for "affliction" is *thlipsis*. Victor Furnish points out that, "*Thlipsis* can refer either to external, objective suffering (e.g., Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 7:28) or to mental anguish (e.g., Phil 1:17)."²² Thus, this God of all comforts concerns himself with the suffering of both the body and the mind; He extends His comfort to us "in all our affliction."

¹⁸ Alfred Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. S. R.; Plummer Driver, A.; Briggs, C.A., The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956; reprint, 1956), 9.

¹⁹ Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 9.

²⁰ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary of Second Corinthians Based on the Greek New Testament* (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1991), 26.

²¹ Campbell, *A Commentary of Second Corinthians Based on the Greek New Testament*, 26.

²² Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 110.

To whom is this comfort given? The Greek word for “us” is *hēmas*. Certainly Paul was thinking of himself and Timothy. A few more verses into the letter, Paul told the Corinthians about some difficult and trying situations he and Timothy faced in Asia, afflictions so great that he and Timothy “despaired even of life.”²³ Yet, does this benefit of comfort even in such dire circumstances only apply to Paul, or can this truth be extended to others?

Plumber says, “The ἡμεῖς [*hēmas*] need not be confined to Paul and Timothy, still less Paul alone. It probably includes all missionaries, and perhaps indirectly all sufferers.”²⁴ Plumber goes on to say,

In missionary work sympathy is the great condition of success (I Cor. ix. 22), and it was part of the training of the Apostles that they should need and receive comfort in order to know how to impart it; and the comfort is deliverance, not necessarily from the suffering, but from the anxiety which sufferings brings. But we need not confine ἡμεῖς to Apostles and missionaries; the words apply to all Christians. It is, however, exaggeration to say that only those who have received consolation know how to impart it.²⁵

Acknowledging that the comfort expressed here is the result of “suffering as a follower of Christ,” Charles R. Erdman goes on to say, “Yet the notes of this song of cheer may strike responsive chords in the soul of anyone who feels the burden of affliction or the burning desire to bring relief to those who are in need.”²⁶

²³ 2 Cor 1:8.

²⁴ Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 9.

²⁵ Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 10.

²⁶ Charles Rosenbury Erdman, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 20.

The Benefit of God's Comfort to Us

What additional benefit does Paul find when God comforts him in his affliction?

In the latter part of verse four Paul says, "...so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."²⁷

As a minister, he is able to comfort others with the same comfort with which he was comforted. Campbell sees the very positive view Paul has toward suffering: "He looks at these afflictions positively – they give God an opportunity to teach him, Paul, about His ability to encourage and comfort those being afflicted."²⁸

This sharing or passing along of God's comfort from one Christian to another Christian is best seen in II Corinthians; Paul writes of a "thorn in the flesh,"²⁹ a suffering from which He implored the Lord three times for relief. According to Paul, the Lord did not remove the cause of his suffering but instead responded, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."³⁰ God comforted Paul with words, and Paul shared those words with the Corinthians. Since then, those same words of comfort, spoken by the Lord to Paul, have been a comfort to countless numbers of believers.

Though We May Suffer in Abundance God Comforts Us in Abundance

In verse five, Paul says, "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."³¹ What does Paul mean by "the sufferings of Christ are ours?" Hughes provides the following insight:

²⁷ 2 Cor 1:4.

²⁸ Campbell, *A Commentary of Second Corinthians Based on the Greek New Testament*, 26.

²⁹ 2 Cor 12:7.

³⁰ 2 Cor 12:9.

³¹ 2 Cor 1:5.

He does not mean suffering merely *for* Christ....Far less does he mean that Christ's sufferings in their redemptive efficacy are in any sense extended or amplified in those of the Church.... For the Christian, however, as Paul explains elsewhere, there is such a thing as the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Phil. 3:10; cf. I Pet. 4:13), that is, a sharing or partnership with Christ in suffering. To follow Christ is to follow Him into suffering. In this also the disciple must expect to be identified with the Master.³²

Plumber understands that Paul has "[i]n the background the thought of the absolute unity between Christ and His members; and although we can hardly think of Him as still liable to suffering when His members suffer, yet their sufferings are a continuation of His, and they supplement His (Col. i. 24) in the work of building up the Church."³³ How would these sufferings and God's comfort build up the church? Plumber says, "One purpose of His sufferings was to make men feel more certain of the love of God."³⁴ That is, God demonstrated his love to the world when He sent His Son to suffer and die for sin of the world. Therefore, Christ's suffering for the Church informs believers and even causes believers to feel God's love for them. When the world asks, "How do we know God loves us?", the world can have the Cross set before their eyes.

If the difficult news is that the "sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance," the good news is that we are comforted in abundance "through Christ." The comfort is not just enough to comfort Paul and Timothy; the comfort is given in abundance. The Greek word translated here as "abundance" is *perisseuō*. The NIV translates this word as "overflows." Hughes writes, "No matter how great the sufferings a Christian is called

³² Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 13.

³³ Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 12.

³⁴ Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 12.

upon to endure, they are matched, and more than matched, by the comfort which God bestows. The comfort is never outweighed by the suffering.”³⁵

Furthermore, the comfort does not originate from Paul; it originates from God and is mediated “through Christ”. When Paul writes “and our comfort is abundant” Plumber says that Paul is not referring a comfort that came from themselves but the comfort they received from the Father.³⁶ God through Christ comforted Paul, and it is with God’s comfort that Paul consoles others as they suffer.

In summary, when we suffer, God himself comforts us in at least two ways: first He makes us aware of His nearness; second, He speaks words of consolation. Furthermore, when we suffer, God’s comfort is not a one-time response. Rather, His comfort is continual, ongoing, and abundant. For the Christian minister who has experienced God’s comfort, he can then, in turn, comfort others with the comfort he has been given. This comfort can and is of benefit to the one suffering because the comfort did not originate with the minister but with God, the source of all comfort.

Having examined the way God comforts us and how His comfort can be of benefit to us as well as to others, the next question is, “What, if anything, can be gained in suffering, especially when our suffering is associated with loss?”

Can Meaning or Benefit Be Found in the Experience of Suffering?

Exegesis of Philippians 3:10-11

(10)that I may know Him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to his death; (11)in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

—Philippians 3:10-11

³⁵ Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 13.

³⁶ Plumber, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 13.

The night before he was shot and killed, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"³⁷ Paul's letter to the Philippians has a similar tone and tenor. Paul wanted nothing more than for Christ to be exalted in his body, and he was confident that would happen "whether by life or by death."³⁸ Paul had assessed his situation and faced it head on. He experienced the uncertainty of knowing that death awaited him, but not knowing when or how. He knew he might not be released from prison, and he knew he might suffer persecution and die. We see that he had made peace with the prospect of dying and even longed to be with the Lord, for only twenty-one verses into the letter, Paul wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain....I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better."³⁹

Facing the possibility of his impending death, he determined to thank the Philippians for all they had done for him and for the advancement of the gospel. He wanted them not to be upset by his imprisonment and not to think that Christ was no longer at work in his life or in their lives. Further, he wanted to strengthen their faith by commending them in what they had done through faith in Jesus and to encourage them to continue to be like Christ in how they related to one another and in how they endured suffering and persecution. He longed to give them a message of assurance to hold on to in the event he was sentenced to death and taken from them. He succeeded at

³⁷ American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm> (accessed April 6, 2010).

³⁸ Phil 1:20.

³⁹ Phil 1:21.

communicating all of these things, and the modern church is still being reassured by that message of faith and still being encouraged to persevere.

The death Paul anticipated and even desired was postponed yet again: Paul was released from this particular Roman imprisonment. According to tradition, under Emperor Nero, Paul was later found guilty of being a Christian and beheaded on the Ostian Way.⁴⁰

The passage, and particularly verses ten through eleven, express for believers what is to be gained even as all else is lost. Paul had lost his freedom, many of his relationships, and his social identity and credibility, and now, faced with losing his life, what does he have to gain in the experience of all these losses? He testified that he gained a closer and deeper walk with the Lord.

As elder believers grow older and closer to death, they begin to experience loss upon loss. These losses are painful and difficult. Such suffering is made worse when there seems to be no meaning or nothing to gain in it. The need to find meaning or benefit in suffering is one of the issues addressed in this thesis. Paul wrote that, when Christians suffer, either by choice or by the circumstances of life, the loss of things on earth which we think compose our identity or personhood, we learn that our true identity is in Christ. For seniors saints who have begun losing the elements from which they have created an earthly identity, Paul's words are of great encouragement. Through their loss, they may develop a desire to know more of Christ.

In the Greek, Philippians 3:8-11 is one long sentence. The NASB holds to that design and reads:

⁴⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1963), 631.

(8)More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, (9)and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, (10)that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (11)in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.⁴¹

Other translations divide this long sentence into two or three separate sentences. The NRSV and NIV make verse ten a new sentence, which begins, "I want to know Christ..." The HCSB also starts a new sentence at verse ten: "[My goal] is to know Him..." Based on his analysis of the text, I. Jin Loh makes verses ten and eleven two separate sentences, "All I want is to know Christ, namely to experience the power of his resurrection and share in his sufferings. I want to know Christ by becoming like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from the death to life."⁴²

This thesis' primary focus is the latter part of the sentence, verses ten and eleven. However, the immediate context must be kept in view for proper interpretation. In Philippians 3:2-7, Paul warned the believers in Philippi to "beware" those who teach that the righteousness that comes through knowing Jesus is not sufficient for salvation. Paul used himself as an example of a devoted religious zealot with all the right credentials; but when Jesus came to him and saved him, he learned that salvation came not through religious precepts, but only by knowing Jesus. In verses eight and nine, Paul told the church that the righteousness of Jesus which is given to those who know Him is superior to and of more value than any supposed self-righteousness through performing religious rituals and precepts.

⁴¹ Phil 3:8-11.

⁴² I. Jin Loh and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Helps for Translators (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1983), 106.

After Paul renounced before the Philippians his claim to any righteousness that may be credited him for being a devoted Jew, he passionately revealed his singular desire in life: “(10)that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (11)in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”⁴³

In verses ten and eleven, the NIV translation suggests that Paul wanted to know three separate things: “I want to know [1] Christ and [2] the power of his resurrection and [3] the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...” Moises Silva agrees that “[a] literal rendering suggests three distinct goals: Christ himself, *and* the power of his resurrection, *and* the fellowship of his sufferings. But the first *kai* (“and”) can plausibly be understood as epexegetic: to know Christ *means* to experience his resurrection and to share in his sufferings.”⁴⁴ Gordon Fee also affirms the possibility of the NIV interpretation but, like Silva, leans more toward the view that Paul is explaining what it *means* to know Christ. Fee says, “[M]ore likely Paul intends the first *kai* to be epexegetic, so that the phrases explain, or give content to, what ‘knowing Christ’ means.”⁴⁵

Knowing Christ Outweighs All Our Loss

In verse nine, Paul says he wants to “be found in Him [Christ]” so that, as he says in verse ten “I [Paul] may know him...” According to Gerald F. Hawthorne, “The tense of the infinitive τοῦ γινῶναι [“to know”] is aorist, and very likely an ingressive

⁴³ Phil 3:10-11.

⁴⁴ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, ed. Robert Yarborough and Robert H. Stein, Second ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 163.

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 328.

aorist, i.e. an aorist that sums up the action of the verb at the point at which it commences.” In this sense, then, Paul is saying that he has begun to know Christ and desires to continue growing in his knowledge of Christ.

What kind of knowledge is Paul referencing? Theoretic? Intellectual? Experiential? Subjective? Hawthorne believes that Paul “does not have in mind a mere intellectual knowledge about Christ. Rather, he is thinking about a personal encounter with Christ that inaugurates a special intimacy with Christ that is life-changing and on-going.”⁴⁶

Campbell understands Paul to refer to a broader definition of knowledge:

In this verse he expresses his desire *to know* Christ both intellectually and experientially through daily walking with Him. The Greek phrase translated “unto the end to know” (του γνωναι) is an articular infinitive, which means that Paul’s supreme *purpose* was to experientially *know*, be *familiar with*, and have an *intimate interpersonal relationship* with Christ.⁴⁷

In the Power of His Resurrection and Fellowship of His Sufferings

If we agree with Hawthorne that the knowledge of Christ that Paul desires is experiential knowledge, and if we accept Silva and Fee’s interpretation that the above phrase is epexegetic (i.e., that Paul is here more fully describing what it means to know Christ), then we still must ask what Paul meant by experientially knowing Christ *through the power of His resurrection*.

What does it take to turn a Saul into a Paul, a persecutor into one willing to be persecuted? Paul would answer, “the power of the resurrection.” It is noteworthy that Paul references the power of the resurrection before “fellowship of His sufferings.” Paul,

⁴⁶ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary V.43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 143.

⁴⁷ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary of Philippians and Titus Based on the Greek New Testament* (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1990), 108.

suddenly recognizing his spiritual deadness when confronted by Christ on the road to Damascus, understood that he had to be resurrected in order to be found alive in Christ; further, this impossibility could only be accomplished by the same power that raised Jesus Christ Himself from the dead. As Marvin Richardson Vincent puts it, "The resurrection is viewed, not only as something which Paul hopes to experience after death, nor as a historical experience of Christ which is a subject of grateful and inspiring remembrance, but as a present, continuously active force in his Christian development."⁴⁸ In a very real sense, Paul met Christ personally and understood Him from the Scriptures only *after* the Scriptures about Him had been fulfilled and the resurrection had come to pass. Thus, it is the Christ who has resurrection power and the Christ who has acted upon Paul with that power that Paul wants continually to know.

Similarly, we must ask here – if the fellowship of Christ's sufferings is an essential part of experientially knowing Christ, what specifically does Paul mean by "the fellowship of his sufferings"?

Paul certainly knew what it was to suffer for Jesus in the literal sense:

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.⁴⁹

However, this may not be the kind of suffering Paul alludes to in the text. By all accounts, Paul suffered greatly on account of Christ, but these were his own sufferings,

⁴⁸ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 104.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor 11:24-27.

and not Christ's. Paul wanted to know Christ in "the fellowship of his [Christ's] sufferings." Paul was not necessarily saying that he wanted to know Christ by suffering in the same way Christ suffered, because that was impossible. Hawthorne points out that the Greek *koinōnia* used in the text for "fellowship" includes the idea of "participation or sharing in" something. Hawthorne continues,

Therefore, for Paul to say that he wishes to know Christ and the fellowship of his sufferings is not to say that he seeks to know Christ and to experience physical sufferings of martyrdom, but to know Christ who suffered and died for him, to know that he therefore has suffered and died in Christ, only to be resurrected in him to a new and superlative kind of life.⁵⁰

This is in keeping with Paul's theology that the righteousness which saves is found only in knowing the Christ who suffered, died, was buried and three days later rose from the dead.⁵¹ Paul therefore wanted to be in fellowship with the sufferings of the One whose suffering merited his salvation.

Paul spoke in other letters of this kind of participation which comes only by being "found in Him."⁵² In Romans, Paul wrote, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death...For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection..."⁵³ As Vincent says, "Being in Christ involves fellowship with Christ at all points, -- his obedient life, his spirit, his sufferings, his death, and his glory."⁵⁴

Yet, would Paul also have said that his personal sufferings in Christ led him to know more of Christ? Fee would say yes. However, Fee does not believe our suffering

⁵⁰ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 144.

⁵¹ See 1 Cor 15:3-4.

⁵² Phil 3:9.

⁵³ Rom 6:4-5.

⁵⁴ Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, 105.

contributes to the suffering Christ did for our atonement: "While believers' sufferings do not have the expiatory significance of Christ's, they are nonetheless seen as intimately related to his. Through our suffering the significance of Christ's suffering is manifested to the world, which is why in Philippians 1:29-30⁵⁵ Paul describes such suffering as 'on behalf of Christ.'⁵⁶

In Fee's opinion, Paul "sees present suffering as a participation in Christ's suffering... [and a] way of being conformed into Christ's likeness, whose 'obedience unto death, even death on a cross' is the ultimate paradigm of all Christian life."⁵⁷ Though Hawthorne considers the participation to be more internal and subjective, he does concede to the idea that participation in suffering for Christ does contribute to knowing Christ more intimately:

This interpretation does not totally rule out the thought of physical sufferings or death playing out their transforming role in the Christian's life. In fact, the mystical union with Christ in his sufferings and death...is but strengthened and deepened by any physical pain that may be experienced because of one's faith in Christ. The hazards that Paul faced in his apostolic work, the batterings he was subjected to as a Christian had the potential for being "the concrete external means" by which he could be conformed to Christ's death.⁵⁸

So As To Be Like Christ On the Inside

The Greek word used here for "being conformed" is *summorphizomenos*. According to Loh, this verb is "found nowhere else in the New Testament, but the

⁵⁵ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. Phil 1:29-30 (NIV)

⁵⁶ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 331.

⁵⁷ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 329.

⁵⁸ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 146.

related adjective is used in 3.21 and Rom 8.29.⁵⁹ Campbell notes that Paul's use here of the present tense passive voice means that Paul "desires to be yielded to God the Holy Spirit, to be progressively *formed, moulded* and *shaped* to conform to the death of Christ."⁶⁰

Fee believes that Paul was linking the experience of Christ and his own experience so as to place himself into close relationship with Christ. Fee says,

The combination "being conformed" (*summorphizomenos*) and "death" recall the Christ narrative in 2:6-11, offering the strongest kind of linguistic ties between Paul's story and the story of Christ. In pouring himself out by taking on human likeness, Christ, who is in the "form" (*morphē*) of God, also took on the *morphē* of a slave; and "being found" in human likeness, he humbles himself to *death* on a cross. Now Paul – and by implication Philippians should as well – sees his and their sufferings in Christ's behalf as God's way of "conforming" them into the likeness of Christ which was quite the point of the prior narrative in the first place.⁶¹

While willing to accept that Paul was referring to a literal death, Loh believes, however, that Paul was talking again about a more subjective and internal experience of being conformed to Christ's death. Loh argues,

Commentators who interpret the preceding clause in the sense of outward sufferings generally see in the present clause a reference to physical death. The present clause can then mean "by reproducing the pattern of his death", thus focusing on the manner of death. It can also mean "even to death," that is suffering to the extent of death. While not denying the possibility that the reference can be to physical death, the context appears to demand an interpretation which speaks of an inward transformation of one's nature.⁶²

Hawthorne seems to suggest that, having inwardly been conformed to Christ's death, Paul outwardly continued to take up his cross. As Hawthorne puts it, Paul,

⁵⁹ Loh and Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 105.

⁶⁰ Campbell, *A Commentary of Philippians and Titus Based on the Greek New Testament*, 110.

⁶¹ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 333.

⁶² Loh and Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 105.

already dead to sin by virtue of Christ's death, nevertheless strives to make the effects of that death an ever-present reality within himself by his own constant choice to consider himself in fact dead to sin and alive to God (cf. Rom 6:11), to conform his practice in the world to Christ who calls him to take up his cross daily and follow him as a servant of God for the good of mankind.⁶³

Attaining to the Resurrection from the Dead

Paul's hope was in the resurrection from the dead because he was in fellowship with the sufferings of Christ. Thus, Paul rejoiced not in personal religious practices but rather in his personal relationship with Jesus Christ who suffered. According to Fee, the reason Paul believed that "participation in his sufferings" was cause for joy is "not because suffering is enjoyable, but because it is certain evidence of his intimate relationship with his Lord."⁶⁴ Fee says that Paul's earlier encouragement to the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord" in the midst of their suffering "makes sense only in light of the resurrection of Christ. Without the power inherent in Christ's resurrection, present suffering (even for Christ's sake) is meaningless."⁶⁵

However, was Paul concerned about his salvation? Was Paul in doubt about his position in Christ? Was he afraid that he might not experience the joy of being resurrected into a glorified body? In spite of his strong arguments that salvation is not dependent on works, did Paul still retain some hidden belief that he must attain to, or earn, his own resurrection?

Loh doesn't think so. Loh says the literal interpretation is "if in some way I may attain the resurrection from the dead."⁶⁶ Still, this seems to convey doubt on the part of

⁶³ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 145.

⁶⁴ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 333.

⁶⁵ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 330.

⁶⁶ Loh and Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 106.

Paul, and Loh says as much. Yet, he goes on to say, "in reality what he expresses here is his sense of expectation and hope with humility."⁶⁷

Hawthorne also interprets Paul speaking as a humble man who understood that he had been saved only by God's grace. "[I]t would appear that Paul uses such an unexpected hypothetical construction simply because of humility on his part, a humility that recognizes that salvation is the gift of God from start to finish and that as a consequence he dare not presume on this divine mercy."⁶⁸

Silva also agrees with Loh and Hawthorne, but he stresses that we should not deemphasize what may be a sense of uncertainty. Silva says, "While we ought not, therefore, minimize the note of self-distrust present in this verse, it would be unjust to generalize from it and deduce that Paul did not enjoy assurance of salvation. Too many other passages, as well as the whole tenor of his teaching, make it clear that he did."⁶⁹

To review, Paul experienced loss upon loss, through which he had gained a deep and growing knowledge of Christ—not merely an intellectual knowledge, but an experiential, relational one. As he contemplated his death, he relied on no thing and no person more than he relied on Christ. It was this personal knowledge of and reliance on Christ that outweighed any earthly loss. That was his reason for comfort and joy.

Scripture plainly teaches that, in times of suffering, comfort originates with God. Is this because God knows what it is like to suffer and therefore knows what to say and do to comfort us? Is it possible for God to suffer? And if God can suffer, who comforts Him? Because Christians have rightly debated these theological questions for centuries, this thesis won't presume to answer them. Yet, it may be of benefit to the reader to be

⁶⁷ Loh and Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 106.

⁶⁸ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 146.

⁶⁹ Silva, *Philippians*, 166.

made familiar with the debate by raising a couple questions that relate to the topic of this thesis-project: "Is it possible for God suffer?" and, "Did Christ suffer in his divine nature?" We will now turn our attention to the first question.

Is it Possible for God to Suffer?

The Nicene Creed says that Jesus "suffered and was buried."⁷⁰ These words were carefully selected to make it clear that Jesus was a man - a man who, like all other men, could suffer and die. Prior to working on this thesis-project, if someone had asked me, "Can God suffer?", I would have immediately responded, "Of course God suffers." Now, I'm not so sure. My previous logic would have been simple: Jesus was fully God; Jesus suffered; therefore, God suffered; therefore, God can suffer. However, not everyone agrees with this logic.

The doctrine that addresses God's inability to suffer is called the Doctrine of Impassibility. An old and rarely used definition of the word *passion* is "to suffer." This is why Christ's atoning work is called, "The Passion of Christ." The Doctrine of Impassibility, then, is the idea is that suffering cannot pass through or pass into the divine nature, or more clearly put, that it is impossible for God to suffer.

One argument for the impassibility of God is based on His nature - namely, that He is perfect and eternal. Theologians such as Thomas G. Weinandy who hold to divine impassibility argue that the divine nature of God cannot suffer loss; a perfect and complete God would cease to be so if anything were taken from Him. Since God does not experience any loss in his nature, God cannot suffer. According to Weinandy, the

⁷⁰ J. Wilhelm, "The Nicene Creed", Robert Appleton Company
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11049a.htm> (accessed May 4, 2010).

impassibility of God was a long-established, firmly held view of the early church.

Weinandy writes:

From the dawn of the Patristic period Christian theology has held as axiomatic that God is impassible—that is, He does not undergo emotional changes of state, and so cannot suffer. Toward the end of the nineteenth century a sea change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God *is* passable, that He does undergo emotional changes of states, and so can suffer.⁷¹

Weinandy notes that early church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Novation believed in the impassibility of God because of the complete and absolute love of God. They based their argument upon the idea that suffering is the experience of being deprived from, or losing some, measure of love and goodness. God's love is perfect, it is complete, and it is eternal; therefore it is impossible for God to suffer, because he is never deprived of any measure of love or goodness. Weinandy states, "Almost all the early Fathers attributed impassibility to God in order to safeguard and enhance His utterly passionate love and all-consuming goodness, that is, the divine fervor and zealous resolve with which He pursues the well-being of His cherished people."⁷² The argument, it seems then, is not that God does not experience emotion, but that he experiences one particular emotion always and completely: love.

In opposition to the Doctrine of Impassibility, Dennis Ngien argues that God must be able to suffer, because to love someone naturally suggests openness to the risk of not being loved in return, and not to be loved in return inevitably causes pain and suffering: "If love implies vulnerability, the traditional understanding of God as impassible makes it impossible to say that 'God is love.' An almighty God who cannot

⁷¹ Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," *First Things* 117 (2001): 35.

⁷² Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," 38.

suffer is poverty stricken because he cannot love or be involved."⁷³ Those who hold to impassability might agree with Ngien on this point, but theologians like Weinandy say that God is not vulnerable in the same way people are vulnerable. "God is impassible in that He does not undergo successive and fluctuating emotional states, nor can the created order alter Him in such a way as to cause Him to suffer any modification or loss."⁷⁴ Regardless, Ngein says that the early church Fathers were "wrong to think a suffering God is an imperfect being who necessarily seeks his perfection and tries to overcome his deficiency through actions." Whereas the church fathers viewed the capacity to suffer as a deficiency, thus making God less than perfect, Ngein does not view suffering as a negative, but rather a positive characteristic which enables God to empathize with mankind.

Did Christ Suffer In His Divine Nature?

A second argument for the impassibility of God is based on the view that not everything Jesus experienced in his human nature was equally shared in his divine nature. Theologians such as Kevin DeYoung who say God cannot suffer still agree that Jesus truly suffered – but only in his human nature and not in his divine nature. For example, DeYoung argues, "if Jesus' human nature took a nap, we cannot say the divine nature took a nap, but we can say the Person of the Son took a nap....This is what we need to hear, not that God suffers with us as God, but that God as a man knew human pain and anguish first hand and in the same human manner that we experience it."⁷⁵

⁷³ Dennis Ngien, "God Who Suffers: If God Does Not Grieve, Then Can He Love at All? An Argument for God's Emotions," *Christianity Today* 41, no. 2 (1997): 40.

⁷⁴ Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," 38.

⁷⁵ Kevin DeYoung, "Divine Impassibility and the Passion of Christ in the Book of Hebrews," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (2006): 45 & 46.

Yet, at least with regard to suffering, not all scholars believe the actual experience of the two natures of Christ should be seen as divided. The unity of the human nature and the divine nature suggest mutual experience. Gabriel Frackre says,

To carry this teaching of the divine-human unity of the person of Christ to all stages on the journey to Calvary: do we see *God* in agony in the garden, *God* knocked down, dragged along, lashed over and over again, *God* crowned with thorns, *God* carrying his own cross, *God's* blood, *God* crucified? How dare we talk this way! If Jesus Christ is truly God as well as truly human, how can we *not* talk this way? It boggles the mind and wrenches the heart.⁷⁶

Frackre is in good company; respected theologians Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Jensen, among others, believe it difficult to separate the human experience from the divine experience and therefore to assert that God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, suffered.

Respected scholars are on both sides of the impassibility debate. At this point, one can assert that Christ was fully God and fully man and that, as a man, He, like all other men, suffered and died. Christians who hold to this truth can be inspired to experience their own suffering and death in the same way Christ did, with courage and trust in the Father.

Having established a biblical and theological foundation to understand how God responds to and identifies with suffering and what benefits may arise in our suffering, we will now, in Chapter Three, turn our attention to several extra-biblical sources on the nature of suffering and how to preach effectively to older Christians as they suffer.

⁷⁶ Gabriel J. Frackre, "The Triune God and the Passion of Christ," *Pro Ecclesia* 15, no. 1 (2006): 89.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

I have been young, and now am old;
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or his children begging bread.

—Psalm 37:25 (RSV)

It would be impossible and unhelpful to provide every idea on how to minister to those suffering through the dying process. Query the word “suffering” on any online card catalog, and you will be provided with enough reading for two lifetimes. This is because, as L. Bregman says, “Suffering is pervasive, intrinsic to the human condition, and raises perennial religious and psychological questions.”¹ This chapter provides a small slice of thought on the subject with particular focus on senior saints. The chapter is broken into three sections: section one offers a working understanding of suffering; section two discusses responses to suffering; and section three examines important considerations when preaching to older Christians.

Section One: A Working Understanding of Suffering

Though man exerts much effort attempting to avoid suffering, it is inescapable. The nature of a minister’s job, perhaps even more than that of a medical doctor, puts him in direct contact with those who are suffering all kinds of losses. For both those in the medical field and those in the pastorate, however, understanding the nature and causes of suffering thoroughly enough to address them properly has been challenging,

¹ Rodney J. Hunter, ed. *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 1230.

and the reasons for this are multifold. On the nature of suffering within a medical context, Eric J. Cassell writes, "little attention is explicitly given to the problem of suffering in medical education, research, or practice....even in the best settings and with the best physicians it is not uncommon for suffering to occur not only during the course of a disease but as a result of its treatment."²

As a culture, we have widely succeeded in avoiding the topic of suffering, in part because it is unpleasant, but also because, as Byock notes, "In modern, secular, western culture, suffering is assumed to be wholly adverse and devoid of value. The predominant personal orientation toward suffering is one of avoidance or alleviation. When we suffer, we present ourselves as patients. Indeed the etymology of the word patient means sufferer."³ For those of us who desire to minister to those experiencing suffering, we must actively inform ourselves about the nature of suffering and learn to help those in our pastorate begin to find value and meaning there.

A few standard definitions of *suffering* and *to suffer* are a good place to start. Webster's Dictionary defines *suffering* as, "the state or experience of one that suffers; pain." To expand upon the first definition, Webster's defines the infinitive *to suffer* as, "to submit or be forced to endure; to feel keenly, to labor under; to endure death, pain, or distress; to sustain loss or damage, to be subject to disability or handicap." Writing for the *Dictionary of Pastoral Counseling*, Bregman provides a simple, clinical definition of *suffering* as, "The experience of any kind of pain or distress."⁴ The Westminster

² Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering: And the Goals of Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30.

³ Ira R. Byock, "The Nature of Suffering and the Nature of Opportunity at the End of Life," *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine* 12, no. 2 (1996), <http://courses.washington.edu/bh518/Articles/thenatureofsuffering.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2011), 247.

⁴ Hunter, ed. *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 1230.

Dictionary of Theological Terms defines suffering as, "to bear pain, distress, or injury." Key words are *pain, endure, distress, and loss.*

The Suffering of Physical Pain

When we think of suffering, we often think first of physical pain, and there is an obvious relationship between the two. In her book *Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers*, Therese A. Rando states that the "fear of dying in screaming torment is a common one,"⁵ and Eric Cassell theorizes, "While pain and suffering are not synonymous, physical pain remains a major cause of human suffering and is the primary image formed by people when they think about suffering."⁶ Medical doctors, however, have a cornucopia of medicinal pain relievers that they can prescribe and so most suffering that a pastor will face is of a different sort. Yet, when physical pain is the source of suffering, Cassell notes only three kinds that cause a person to suffer; overwhelming pain, uncontrollable pain, and non-overwhelming pain that seems to have no end.⁷

Thankfully, most people will not experience unmitigated pain throughout their dying process - doctors and hospice agencies can manage pain quite well, giving an important measure of relief both to the sufferer and those who love him. While not minimizing the suffering that physical pain can cause, this thesis focuses more on the other facets of suffering, those that the medical community cannot manage with the same success.

⁵ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 32.

⁶ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 32.

⁷ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 36.

Beyond Physical Pain: Other Facets of Suffering

An understanding of suffering that is limited to physical pain will prevent the preacher from effectively ministering to the older saints in his congregation. Suffering is not limited to physical pain, it cannot always be treated with surgery or medicine, and it can begin before and last beyond physical pain. As Cassell advocates, "Medical intervention can ease physical pain....However, the mere diminution of pain will not and cannot eradicate suffering."⁸ Cassell further notes, "[N]o one disputes that pain is only one among many sources of human suffering."⁹ He believes that medical doctors make too strong an association between pain and suffering, as if the only cause for suffering were the pain associated with the disease. Uninformed patients and their caregivers may be surprised that suffering may still be present even when pain is not.

Like Cassell, Rando opines that suffering is not always only bound up in the experience of pain:

It is important to differentiate between the experience of pain and that of suffering. Pain alone does not equal suffering. For instance, a woman may experience pain in childbirth, but not necessarily suffering....Physical pain is unnecessary. For example, the mother watching the distress of a child may suffer, but she does not necessarily experience physical pain. For the dying patient, this issue is a critical one. The illness taking the patient's life may bring with it physical pain, but suffering does not automatically proceed from it. Whether or not it does is dependent upon what meaning is given to the pain."¹⁰

If suffering is not exclusively related to physical pain, then what alternative origins might it have?¹¹ Cassell concluded: "Suffering occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived; it continues until the threat of disintegration has

⁸ Therese A. Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers* (Champaign, IL: Research Press Co., 1984), 206.

⁹ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 32.

¹⁰ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 206.

¹¹ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 206.

passed or until the integrity of the person can be restored in some other manner.”¹² As Rando puts it, “Bodies do not suffer, a person suffers, and this usually occurs when the intactness of the person is threatened or lost. For suffering to take place, a loss or disruption of the sense of wholeness must occur.” In other words, both Cassell and Rando believe that suffering is not merely a physiological response of pain, but a psychological perception of threat to one’s identity or way of being. For example, when an elderly person is no longer permitted to drive, he may not be in any physical pain, but he may suffer a loss of identity in that he is no longer independent in the same way he was before. Likewise, if an elderly musician loses her hearing, she may experience suffering because she is no longer able to participate with the world in a way that previously helped define who she was – she has experienced, as Rando puts it, “a loss or disruption of the sense of wholeness.”¹³ Suffering then is most felt when a person endures something that, for them, causes a particular loss or damage to their sense of wholeness and completeness as a person. Cassell says that suffering can be defined as “the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person.”¹⁴

Further, what “threatens the intactness” of one person may not be perceived as a threat by another. For example, a patient with terminal stomach cancer, very near death, told Cassell that he was not suffering. However, Cassell encountered another patient “suffering bitterly” as she waited for a report to find out if her blood count had returned to normal after having undergone chemotherapy. A third patient, after minor surgery involving very little physical pain, told Cassell that “even coming to the hospital

¹² Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 33.

¹³ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 206.

¹⁴ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 33.

had been a source of suffering."¹⁵ This individual component to suffering is probably the greatest variance of suffering among persons.

Cassell gave the following example of the multidimensional nature of suffering:

A thirty-five-year-old sculptor with cancer of the breast that had spread widely was treated by competent physicians employing advanced knowledge and technology and acting out of kindness and true concern. At every stage, the treatment as well as the disease was a source of suffering for her. She was frightened and uncertain about her future but could get little information from her physicians, and what she was told was not always the truth. She was unaware, for example, that the radiation therapy to the breast (in lieu of a mastectomy) would be so disfiguring. After her ovaries were removed and a regimen of medications that were masculinizing, she became obese, grew facial and body hair of a male type, and her libido disappeared...She had come to believe that it was her desire to live that would end each remission, because every time that her cancer would respond to treatment and her hope rekindle, a new manifestation would appear. Thus, when a new course of chemotherapy was started, she was torn between her desire to live and her fear that allowing hope to emerge again would merely expose her to misery if treatment failed...She felt isolated because she was not like other people and could not do what other people did. She feared that her friends would stop visiting her. She was sure she would die.¹⁶

This young woman had severe pain and other physical symptoms that caused her suffering. But she also suffered from threats that were social and others that were personal and private. She suffered from the effects of the disease and its treatment on her appearance and her abilities. She also suffered unremittingly from her perception of the future."¹⁷

Such a case, according to Cassell, provides a couple of facts "about the ends of medicine and the relief of suffering."¹⁸ First, her suffering included intense physical pain that was not alleviated. Additionally, she suffered fears and uncertainties about her present condition, the treatment of her condition, the outcome of her treatment and the ways in which that outcome would affect her future. Byock also emphasizes the aspect

¹⁵ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 31.

¹⁶ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 30.

¹⁷ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 31.

¹⁸ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 31.

of suffering that is caused by fears about the future: "The dimension of the future is under direct attack for the dying person. Whereas previously the future was filled with hopes and plans, it now seems empty and bleak. *Expressions of suffering* commonly are set in the near future: 'If my breathing (or pain or weakness) gets any worse, I'll not be able to take it.'"¹⁹

In addition to suffering physical pain and psychological fears, the woman in Cassell's case study also suffered greatly the loss of an important part of her identity – her womanhood – due to changes both in her appearance and also to her internal desires. But all of these factors together still do not fully delineate the attributes of her suffering. She suffered yet more psychologically as she fought to squelch her own desire to live, hoping that this would keep the disease at bay somehow. She also suffered socially, feeling isolated and afraid that she would be abandoned by those who loved her.

Though it is not mentioned in this particular case study, it is of note that a person suffering through the dying process may experience not only these compounding losses and more, he also has the knowledge that he will never regain what he is losing. Unlike other losses, by definition there is no earthly recovery from the loss of identity and wholeness that leads to death. The person's entire self is being permanently lost.

In sum, a minister who assumes that physical pain is the only reason for a person's suffering will fall short in communicating a medicinal word to those suffering as they near death. Suffering occurs when a person experiences a loss that threatens his wholeness as a person. Such suffering can occur because the threat is real and present or because of a fear that could be actualized in the future. Furthermore, what is viewed

¹⁹ Byock, "The Nature of Suffering," 242.

as a threat to one's wholeness varies between individuals. The experience of suffering is complex and unique to every person; it is no wonder it is so challenging to minister effectively to those suffering near death.

Section Two: Processing Grief and the Needs of Sufferers

The Five Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross literally wrote the book on how a person processes the reality of impending death. Her *Five Stages of Grief* has been used as the foundation for understanding grief in universities, medical schools, and theological schools throughout America since the 1970s. Her stages are heavily referenced in hospice material provided to those who are dying and their loved ones, and they have been applied by counselors to grief associated with losses as varied as the loss of a job to the death of a child to the loss of a marriage due to divorce. Given its standing and importance, this section will briefly review each of the five stages of grief as defined by Kübler-Ross.

While many are generally familiar with Ms. Kübler-Ross and her *Five Stages of Grief*, fewer are familiar with how her model originated. Four seminary students from the Chicago School of Theology determined to research how people respond to crisis; it was the opinion of the students that the most significant crisis any person would face was death and that the best way to learn about the experience of dying was to visit with and interview terminally ill patients. They asked Kübler-Ross, a medical doctor in Chicago, Illinois, for help. As a result, in 1965, Kübler-Ross and the four seminary students began interviewing terminally ill patients on a weekly basis. Their research involved 200 dying patients, and within two years, what began as a research project for

four became "an accredited course for the medical school and the theological seminary."²⁰

Though originally developed as stages of grief terminally ill patients would experience, it turned out that those same stages can apply to someone who experiences any kind of significant loss. It is reasonable to expect that seniors experiencing the suffering and losses associated with dying would pass through Kübler-Ross' stages of grief; even more significant is that, because the many losses associated with dying are compounded one upon another, it is likely that seniors will be at any moment in *several* of these stages.

Stage One: Denial

Upon hearing about an impending loss, a person might say, "No, that will never happen to me." For example, a senior who is told by her family that she can no longer live alone and needs to move into a nursing home may respond with variations of, "No, I don't. I can live out the rest of my life right here. I don't need any help. I'm fine." Kübler-Ross does not view this as a negative response. Rather, it is a mechanism by which a person is able to set aside her situation and continue to pursue life. Quoting an unknown author, Kübler-Ross said, "We cannot look at the sun all the time, we cannot face death all the time."²¹ One can contemplate one's death for only so long; then one must shift his attention and focus to other matters. In this way, denial acts as a "buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time,

²⁰ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families* (New York: Simon & Shuster Inc., 1997), 35.

²¹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 52.

mobilize other, less radical defenses."²² Most often, denial will eventually give way to acceptance. However, Kübler-Ross did note that a few of the 200 terminally ill patients they interviewed remained in extreme denial lasting until even the last hour before death.

Stage Two: Anger

As the person moves through denial and begins to face the reality that they have suffered or will suffer an unwanted loss, anger sets in. According to Kübler-Ross, this is one of the more difficult of the five stages for those who have to care for the person.

Kübler-Ross says,

The reason for this is the fact that this anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random. The doctors are just no good, they don't know what tests to require and what diet to prescribe. They keep the patients too long in the hospital or don't respect their wishes in regards to special privileges. They allow a miserably sick roommate to be brought into their room when they pay so much money for some privacy and rest, etc. The nurses are even more often a target of their anger. Whatever they touch is not right. The moment they have left the room, the bell rings. The light is on the very minute they start their report for the next shifts of nurses. When they do shake the pillows and straighten out the bed, they are blamed for never leaving the patients alone.²³

Such anger directed at those who are trying to help is very painful for the caregiver, particularly if the person at whom the anger is directed has little experience dealing with people at such a point of crisis. Kübler-Ross says, "The tragedy is perhaps that we do not think of the reasons for patients' anger and take it personally, when it has originally nothing or little to do with the people who become the target of the anger."²⁴ Maybe this is why some family members may not visit an elderly mother or father as often as

²² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 52.

²³ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 64.

²⁴ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 65.

they might, because their parent is stuck in anger and has no kind remarks to offer. Yet, Kübler-Ross encourages caregivers to continue to engage the grieving person. She says that, given enough time and attention by someone who respects and understands, the patient will eventually calm down.²⁵

Stage Three: Bargaining

People the world over bargain to get what they need or want from one another, and, generally speaking, it is a useful life skill. Attempting to bargain is also a normal response to loss. As the grieving person realizes the futility of anger, he will begin bargaining for a change of circumstance: "If we have been unable to face the sad facts in the first period and have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening."²⁶ Like a child who, after a temper tantrum, comes to her parent promising to make her bed all week if only she can go to the sleep-over, the person facing loss makes promises to God and/or those around them, attempting to make the suffering stop.

Kübler-Ross theorizes that bargaining is really an attempt to postpone the undesired happening. She noted three elements of bargaining. First, it includes a prize for good behavior. A patient might say, "I'll eat what you want me to, if you will only let me..." Second, it sets a self-imposed deadline. "Give me just one more month and then I will..." Last, it includes the promise that no more requests will be made if this one request is met. "If you let me this one time, I won't ask you for it again." However, the

²⁵ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 65.

²⁶ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 93.

patient is destined to continue at bargaining, especially if it worked once before. Kübler-Ross says,

Most bargains are made with God and are usually kept a secret or mentioned between the lines or in a chaplain's private office. In our individual interviews without an audience we have been impressed by the number of patients who promise, 'a life dedicated to God' or 'a life in the service of the church' in exchange for some additional time. Many of our patients also promised to give parts of or their whole body 'to science' (if the doctors use their knowledge of science to extend their life).²⁷

Caregivers, especially chaplains, should listen closely to what 'good behavior' a patient offers if postponement were granted. It may be that the dying patient is revealing guilt about something they did or didn't do in the past. Though it may be impossible to grant his wish, this is an opportunity to help the person deal with unresolved guilt and give him a measure of peace.

Stage Four: Depression

Though in its worst forms depression can and should be of great concern to a caregiver, it is normal for a person who is progressing closer to a point of acceptance to first pass through this stage. "When a terminally ill patient can no longer deny his illness, when he is forced to undergo more surgery or hospitalization, when he begins to have more symptoms or becomes weaker and thinner, he cannot smile it off anymore."²⁸ Depression is a natural response when a person begins to accept the reality of their loss.

Kübler-Ross identified two kinds of depression, reactive and preparatory, that those near dying experience. Kübler-Ross believes that these two types of depression

²⁷ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 95.

²⁸ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 97.

should not be dealt with in the same way. Reactive depression is that depression a person near death and dying experiences when they feel guilty for not being able to fulfill a role or responsibility. For example, a grandfather who has taught all the grandchildren how to fish and who is now near death may feel guilty that he will not be able to teach his last grandchild how to fish when she comes of age. Similarly, an elderly wife may experience reactive depression as she comes to terms with the fact that she will not be around to care for her husband as he struggles with aging. Reactive depression can be best dealt with through encouraging words, confirming statements by caregivers. "Dad, don't you worry - I'll teach Johnny how to fish exactly the way you taught me." "Mom, dad is in great hands. We'll make sure he continues to have everything he needs."

Preparatory depression arises for a different reason and should be dealt with differently. According to Kübler-Ross, preparatory depression is experienced when the dying person begins to accept the reality of their impending death and that nothing can be done. This kind of depression, says Kübler-Ross, is a "tool to prepare for impending loss of all the love objects, in order to facilitate the state of acceptance."²⁹ Words of encouragement and reassurance are not as meaningful to a person with preparatory depression. To try and cheer the person up with encouraging statements is "often an expression of our own needs, our own inability to tolerate a long face over any extended period of time."³⁰ Kübler-Ross goes on to say how best to respond to such depression:

The patient should not be encouraged to look at the sunny side of things, as this would mean he should not contemplate his impending death. It would be contraindicated to tell him not to be sad, since all of us are tremendously sad when we lose one beloved person. The patient is in the process of losing

²⁹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99.

³⁰ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99.

everything and everybody he loves. If he is allowed to express his sorrow he will find a final acceptance much easier, and he will be grateful to those who can sit with him during this stage of depression without constantly telling him not to be sad.³¹

Preparatory depression does not require a lot of words to be spoken by caregivers. Most valuable at this time is gentle, loving presence - the touch of a hand, the stroke of her hair.³²

Stage Five: Acceptance

If given enough time, eventually most persons near death will accept their situation for what it is and not what they want it to be. With that acceptance, a person will be weary from the energy spent as they passed through each preceding stage.

Kübler-Ross says,

He will be tired and, in most cases, quite weak. He will also have a need to doze off or to sleep often and in brief intervals, which is different from the need to sleep during times of depression. This is not a sleep of avoidance or a period of rest to get relief from pain, discomfort, or itching. It is a gradually increasing need to extend the hours of sleep similar to that of the newborn child but in reverse order. It is not a resigned and hopeless 'giving up,' a sense of 'what's the use' or 'I just cannot fight it any longer,' though we hear that too.³³

Acceptance then gives way to rest.

One may assume that, since the dying person is at a place of acceptance, he might have a more cheery disposition. Kübler-Ross argues that this is not the case. She writes, "Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for

³¹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99.

³² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99.

³³ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 124.

'the final rest before the long journey' as one patient phrased it."³⁴ The patient has a more stilled and quiet spirit.

In this stage, the family needs more help and support than the patient. The patient is not non-responsive; however, he is not responsive in the same way. It is as though, now that acceptance has taken place, there is very little to be said and not much reason to bother with matters that no longer matter. As death draws nigh, the patient "wishes to be left alone or at least not stirred up by news and problems of the outside world."³⁵ Kübler-Ross goes on to say, "Visitors are often not desired and if they come, the patient is no longer in a talkative mood. He often requests limitation on the number of people and prefers short visits. This is the time when the television is off. Our communications then become more nonverbal than verbal."³⁶ At this stage an evening visit is probably most beneficial. The day has ended, the hustle and bustle of the hospital staff has slowed, doctors have finished their rounds; to have a short, quiet visit by someone who cares communicates much to those near death.

Four Types of Death: Focusing on Social Death and Abandonment

D. Sudnow defines four types of deaths a dying person experiences: social death, psychological death, biological death, and physiological death. He describes psychological death as the loss of "the aspects of the dying individual's personality."³⁷ Biological death occurs when the individual loses consciousness and awareness, yet

³⁴ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 124.

³⁵ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 124.

³⁶ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 124.

³⁷ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 207.

organs function under artificial support. Physiological death occurs when all vital organs shut down.

This section will focus on *social death*, which “represents the symbolic death of the patient in the world the patient has known. Socially, this world begins to shrink...The number of social contacts the patient has diminish...Withdrawal and separation from others result from the patient’s increasing preoccupation with the illness and grieving for the losses to come.”³⁸ Social death can be aggravated by several factors.

In their study, *Distance from Death as a Variable in the Study of Aging*, Morton Lieberman and Annie Coplan found that seniors who were near death and living in a stable socioenvironmental condition coped better than those whose environments were unstable. According to Lieberman and Coplan,

Environmental change is known to constitute a severe crisis for elderly people; previous patterns of relationships, meanings of significant others, and the self-image are challenged and tested by disruption of the environment. Individuals in this crisis state may have been anxious over impending death, not because their approaching death was of such great concern to them, but because life again had impinged on them, forcing them to make new adjustments and face anew previously solved problems including, perhaps, a previous resolution of the death issue.³⁹

Many people view their environment as part of what makes them feel whole and intact. As elderly people lose independence and mobility, it is often the case that they experience a change or adjustment in their environment, often not of their choosing, whether it is the imposition of an in-home care provider they don’t want or a move to a relative’s home, nursing home, hospital or hospice center. Environmental changes such

³⁸ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 207.

³⁹ Cary S. Kart and Barbara Bolling Manard, eds., *Aging in America: Readings in Social Gerontology* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Alfred Pub. Co., 1976), 501.

as these often cause a severe disruption to the person's social involvement, adding suffering by exacerbating social death.

In addition to circumstantial changes which, though they may be unwelcome, are often necessary as a person nears death, social death is also exacerbated by the tendency of caregivers to avoid those suffering near death - a consistent finding in research. C. Ferris Jordon offers a scenario of an eighty-five-year-old man in the Golden Meadows Nursing Home who represents the experience of five percent of seniors placed in a nursing home:

From all indications, his four children placed him in the home and virtually abandoned him. His only physical problem is diabetes, which is controlled by diet. He does not suffer from any debilitating diseases such as Alzheimer's or organic brain syndrome. His ability to think and recall is excellent for a person in his ninth decade. He is cognizant of having been forsaken by his family. The attention he gets from the social workers, nurses' aides, and visiting church groups keeps him from being in a constant state of depression; nonetheless, in his private moments he is aware of being cut off by his family.⁴⁰

Jordon's scenario contains both factors intensifying the experience of social death: the elderly gentleman here has suffered a change of environment and also a change of response by his family. Though this man's death does not seem eminent, he is treated as though he is already dead, which causes him to suffer.

Thomas Powers noted, "In the final stages of dying the greatest fear of patients is abandonment, with good reason. When possible, hospitals will try to send patients home to die. Doctors often cut back their visits...and even families of the dying frequently begin to detach themselves."⁴¹ At least in the above scenario the social workers and nurses' aides are attentive. However, as this man grows even closer to

⁴⁰ C. Ferris Jordan, "The Spiritual Dynamics of Aging," *Theological Educator: A Journal of Theology and Ministry* 53 (1996): 61.

⁴¹ Steven H. Zarit, ed. *Readings in Aging and Death: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 268.

death, research seems to indicate that even the attention given by the nurses' aides will diminish. Richard A. Kalish referenced prior research that revealed an alarming trend in nursing home care:

In essence, the number and proportion of the post-65-year-olds are increasing, as are the facilities and the professional, financial, and political interest. At the same time, the personal encounter with the aged and the dying still seems highly upsetting and is most commonly avoided. For example, "Probably one of the most interesting and most telling examples of how the dying are avoided was cited in Bowers, et al. (1964). One of the authors, Lawrence LeShan, computed the length of time it took hospital nurses to respond to call lights for terminal cases and compared it to the time for nonterminal cases; the nurses, although not the observer, were startled to learn how much they delayed answering the ring of the dying."⁴²

Is it no wonder then that residents of nursing homes who hear the cries of the dying express the desire to die quickly and quietly? In his research, residents shared with Victor Marshall their hopes in dying:

I hope...when the end comes it'll be snappy. You know, I know one person here who carries a cyanide pill with him...I think he dreads a terrible siege.

I hope that when that time comes it will come fast. I've given the doctors instructions that way.

I don't know what I hope to accomplish. I hope for a quick death when it comes.

I'd just like to go to sleep and never wake up. Kind of cowardly, but I haven't anyone to say goodbye to.

Everybody wishes they'd have a sudden heart attack. No one wants a lingering incapacity.⁴³

Such statements reveal that often the great concern for those near death is not death itself, but rather how they die. They want to die in particular way but have to deal with the fact that this is just another issue that they do not have control over. As one of

⁴² Kart and Manard, eds., *Aging in America*, 563.

⁴³ Kart and Manard, eds., *Aging in America*, 520.

Marshall's subjects said, "I think the thing that is feared is dying, not death. You see you want to die nobly, and you're afraid you won't be able to."⁴⁴ If they would die quickly and quietly they would not have to endure an even more poignant sense of abandonment from caregivers.

Beneficial Responses to Suffering

If suffering goes beyond the doctoring capabilities of even the best trained, best educated, most caring physicians and if modern medicine cannot completely remove suffering, what can be done for those who suffer, especially those near death?

The primary way suffering can be minimized is through the presence of a loving, informed caregiver. According to Cassell, suffering is "psychological in nature and must be ministered to through the therapeutic intervention of a concerned and present other." Rando also believes that concerned caregivers are invaluable to minimizing suffering:

The effective caregiver recognizes that "staying" is an important element of pain management. It requires staying with the patient not so much through physical presence (although this is critical), but by remaining open and available to the patient despite the pain and anxiety involved in attending to the terminally ill. If the patient has the comfort of human presence and is not isolated in his pain, the tolerance of it may be much higher.⁴⁵

Cassell suggests that a person who has lost some measure of wholeness can draw strength from others. He says that this is "one of the latent functions of physicians: lending strength." Cassel goes on to say, "A group, too, may lend strength: Consider the success of groups of the similarly afflicted in easing the burden of illness (e.g.,

⁴⁴ Kart and Manard, eds., *Aging in America*, 519.

⁴⁵ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 236.

women who have had a mastectomy, people with ostomies, fellow sufferers from a rare sickness, or even the parents or family members of the diseased).⁴⁶

The nearness and concern of others can be demonstrated in simple ways, says Byock:

Loved ones and caring professionals can help, at minimum by easing the sense of "aloneness" the dying person may feel. The occasional phone call or physician's home visit acknowledges the personhood of the patient and communicates caring. Even when suffering derives from the deepest realms of the personal—psychosocial, existential or spiritual—experience teaches that clinicians can be helpful, but only if they remain involved.⁴⁷

To know that someone cares is great gain for those experiencing great loss.

Some find that suffering can more easily be endured or even minimized by attributing meaning to it. Part of what defines suffering is the perceived lack of meaning or purpose. The senselessness of physical pain, the waste of struggling with loneliness and fears – to experience these things to no good purpose is to compound the suffering. As a person attempts to maintain some balance of wholeness as a person, he may search for and find a gain to substitute for his loss. A sufferer might say to himself that the suffering will be worth it if something good comes from it. Cassell suggests that "assigning meaning to the injurious condition often reduces or even resolves the suffering associated with it."⁴⁸ No wonder people reach far and wide to find the meaning in suffering, to grab hold of some positive gain in the midst of negative loss.

This ability to transcend the suffering is, in Cassell's opinion, "probably the most powerful way in which one is restored to wholeness after an injury to personhood."

⁴⁶ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 45.

⁴⁷ Byock, "The Nature of Suffering," 243.

⁴⁸ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 45.

Cassell goes on to say, "When experienced, transcendence locates the person in a far larger landscape. The sufferer is not isolated by pain but is brought closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares that meaning."⁴⁹ Acknowledging the power of the Christian form of transcendence, namely identification with the suffering of Christ, Cassell says, "But if there were no Christ with whom to bond, no God to give the suffering meaning, would the agony then be uplifting? I think not. Christian suffering (in this sense) is not suffering precisely because of the occasion for transcendence it offers."⁵⁰ Byock shares Cassell's opinion about the power and importance of transcending and assigning meaning to suffering. Byock writes, "Hospice experience confirms that suffering often becomes endurable—or miraculously dissolves—when it becomes meaningful for the person. The personal meaning of suffering may seem to others to be abstract, but for the person dying, meaning is a tangible entity, deriving substance and shape from the individual's life history."⁵¹

Byock goes on to reference Victor Frankl, the author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, who wrote about his internment in Nazi concentration camps. From his experience, Frankl developed a method of psychotherapy known as *logotherapy*. Frankl focuses on helping individuals find meaning in their life experiences, including the ones that cause great suffering. Byock writes,

Victor Frankl emphasizes that the dimension of meaning is central to the human experience of suffering. Pain and privation are insufficient to explain suffering...Human suffering requires the felt loss of meaning and purpose in life. Pain and privation can be endured if it is for a purpose...For the dying person,

⁴⁹ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 46.

⁵⁰ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 46.

⁵¹ Byock, "The Nature of Suffering," 250.

however, suffering may seem inescapable. All that has given meaning and purpose to an individual's life would appear to be dissolving."⁵²

We should not be too surprised by the power of assigning meaning to suffering. With respect to every other aspect of life, people search for meaning. There is no reason to think that this pursuit would not continue in the midst of suffering and the dying experience.

To review, older Christians will process their suffering through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Because the nature of the dying process involves so many losses, a senior congregant is likely to experience several of the five stages of grief at once. Those suffering through the dying process may experience social death exacerbated by a change of environment and a change of interaction with family, friends, and caregivers, and many experience a deep sense of abandonment and isolation. It behooves a preacher to know and recognize these responses to suffering so as to more wisely and effectively minister to his flock through the spoken word. Further, research and experience demonstrate that the presence of a loving, skilled caregiver and the ascription of some measure of meaning to suffering can help make the suffering more bearable; in some instances, attributing meaning to suffering may cause a person to transcend his suffering to such a degree that his suffering is actually relieved.

⁵² Byock, "The Nature of Suffering," 242.

Section Three: Important Considerations When Preaching to Older Christians

In his article *Preaching and Aging*, Fred Craddock quotes from a letter written to him by an older gentleman who wanted Craddock to pass on some preaching advice to his students, "And one other thing, please. Help them understand they were called to give us a message and not just a 'three-pointed' homiletical gem. Many of us are weary before they get to that 'third point,' which they seem always to call, 'Lastly...'"⁵³

Ideally, every sermon will communicate one central idea. Having three points is not bad, as long as those three points are related. When the three points come together in the preaching event, the listener must take away the single message the preacher intended to communicate. H. Grady Davis called this experience "one thought catching others up into itself."⁵⁴ According to Haddon Robinson, "Sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas."⁵⁵ Preaching a clear message is always important, but when your audience is suffering because they are drawing close to death, only a clearly-communicated biblical truth will have a medicinal quality.

Sermon preparation then is the formation and organization of multiple ideas that, when preached, communicate a single biblical idea. With adequate preparation, a preacher may share four or five ideas; but if they do not come together and clearly communicate the intended primary message, the preacher has failed. John Henry Jowett believed the most demanding task of a preacher is developing a clear and exact understanding of the message he is going to preach. Jowett writes,

⁵³ Barbara P. Payne and Earl D. C. Brewer, eds., *Gerontology in Theological Education* (New York: Haworth Press, 1989), 153.

⁵⁴ Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 20.

⁵⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 35.

I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as a crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labour in my study. To compel oneself to fashion that sentence, to dismiss every word that is vague, ragged, ambiguous, to think oneself through to a form of words which defines the theme with scrupulous exactness,—this is surely one of the most vital and essential factors in the making of a sermon.⁵⁶

If the preacher doesn't know exactly what he wants to say, what chance does a listener have in hearing what is intended? Robinson says, "To ignore the principle that a central, unifying idea must be at the heart of an effective sermon is to push aside what experts in both communication theory and preaching have to tell us."⁵⁷

It may be that a preacher has "in mind" a message he wants to preach, but is uncertain how to clarify that idea. Knowing the anatomy of an idea helps a preacher clarify his thinking, which benefits not only himself but also his listeners. An idea, then, has two components; a subject and a statement about the subject. Haddon Robinson refers to them as the *subject* and the *complement*.⁵⁸ Any sermon, or for that matter any kind of speech, is the embodiment of a subject and something said about the subject.

A preacher can ask himself two questions to clarify the message he wants to communicate; definite answers to these two questions help crystallize a thought or an idea. With regards to the first question, Robinson says, "The subject of a sermon idea...calls for the full, precise answer to the question, 'What am I talking about?'"⁵⁹ Once that question is answered, the preacher can then ask the second question: "What

⁵⁶ John Henry Jowett, *The Preacher, His Life and Work* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), 133.

⁵⁷ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 37.

⁵⁸ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 41.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 41.

am I saying about what I am talking about?"⁶⁰ If the second question is not answered, then nothing can be said of the subject. As Robinson says,

A subject cannot stand alone. By itself it is incomplete, and therefore it needs a complement. The complement "completes" the subject by answering the question, "What am I saying about what I am talking about?" A subject without a complement dangles as an open-ended question. Complements without subjects resemble automobile parts not attached to a car. An idea emerges only when the complement is jointed to a definite subject.⁶¹

Though laborious and demanding, a preacher will have no greater benefit in the preparation of his sermon than when he first answers these two questions and brings them together to form a central idea.

With an appropriate appreciation for communicating a singular idea, what biblical themes or ideas are beneficial to those near death and dying? About preaching to any particular group, John Broadus says, "As always—preach the gospel."⁶² That is, preach the good news concerning God's Son, Jesus, the Christ. Because the gospel is not precept-oriented, but rather person-oriented, because the gospel is not regulation-oriented, but rather relationship-oriented, it is the most meaningful and medicinal message that can be communicated to seniors suffering near death. Dying seniors need to know that someone is with them, that someone is comforting them, and that someone will be there to greet them on the other side. The relational aspect of the gospel message meets so many of the needs of those who suffer near death.

⁶⁰ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 41.

⁶¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 41.

⁶² John Albert Broadus and Jesse Burton Weatherspoon, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, New and rev. ed. (New York, London,: Harper & brothers, 1944), 314.

Connect the Central Biblical Truth to a Need

People listen to someone who speaks to their need. As Jay E. Adams counseled, "In a sense, you are always analyzing congregational members if you love them and care for their welfare. You develop a sensitivity to congregational needs akin to the sensitivity that a mother has for her baby's needs. That, of course, is in accord with the idea that leaders are to 'keep watch' over the flock."⁶³ Preachers who want to make a difference in the lives of their hearers will relate biblical concepts to the specific contemporary needs of their actual audience.

The subjects that can be extrapolated from the reality of the gospel can minister directly to many of the needs of seniors near death. Kenneth L. Chafin said, "The word of the gospel is the only word we have which speaks to the deepest and most profound need of all people—the need for love, acceptance, forgiveness, meaning, and hope."⁶⁴ Referencing Schulz, Rand says, "Of all the needs of the dying patient, the three most crucial are the needs for control of pain, preservation of dignity and self-worth, and love and affection."⁶⁵ The gospel message says that if the pain cannot be controlled, if a dignified death is not possible, and if love and affection is taken away, there is yet a God who knows and who has experienced the same in the person of His Son. This God is able and willing to be with us and to comfort us in the midst of such suffering.

Senior-saints suffering near death need to know they are not alone. As noted earlier, many older Christians near death feel isolated and abandoned. A younger preacher who can come into compassion with that experience without having felt it

⁶³ Jay Edward Adams, *Preaching with Purpose: The Urgent Task of Homiletics*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 38.

⁶⁴ Michael Duduit, *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 537.

⁶⁵ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 267.

himself goes a long way in effectively communicating the gospel. Addressing this subject Craddock encourages pastors to “ponder the word ‘alone.’”⁶⁶ Craddock goes on to say, “What is it to eat alone? Those who devised punishment for criminals long ago realized that one of the most severe forms of punishment is solitary confinement. The Scripture understands this clearly, knowing the enormous burden of loneliness...”⁶⁷ Surely, Christ has a comforting word for those near death who feel abandoned and alone.

Senior believers suffering near death need hope. The gospel message is a medicinal word because it is hope-based. Hope of any kind is a powerful state of mind for those near death. According to Kübler-Ross,

The one thing that usually persists through all [five stages] is hope. In listening to our terminally ill patients we were always impressed that even the most accepting, the most realistic patients left the possibility open for some cure, for the discovery of a new drug or the “last-minute success in a research project.” It is this glimpse of hope which maintains them through days, weeks, or months of suffering.⁶⁸

Rando states clearly how important she views hope for those suffering and near death:

Hope is an essential requirement for existence to continue, for the threat of demise to be confronted, and for life’s meaning to be sustained. Hope must never be destroyed. The transmission of diagnoses and discussions with patients must never preclude the patient’s being able to hang on to some hope, however tenuous.⁶⁹

Though hope is of great value, two conflicts can arise at a critical stage for the dying patient. Kübler-Ross writes this about these two conflicts:

The first and most painful one was the conveyance of hopelessness either on part of the staff or family when the patient still needed hope. The second source

⁶⁶ Payne and Brewer, eds., *Gerontology in Theological Education*, 155.

⁶⁷ Payne and Brewer, eds., *Gerontology in Theological Education*, 155.

⁶⁸ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 148.

⁶⁹ Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death*, 270.

of anguish came from the family's inability to accept a patient's final stage; they desperately clung to hope when the patient himself was ready to die and sensed the family's inability to accept this fact.⁷⁰

The gospel not only relates the immediate presence of God while the person is suffering; it communicates the future, continuous presence of God after death. Because the gospel offers hope for the present and for the future, a gospel-centric sermon can truly minister, especially to a senior saint near death.

Messages whose themes or ideas that apply the gospel to each of the five stages of grief, *denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance*, can effectively minister.

Speak From Their Past Using Their Language

As stated earlier, older Christians who are suffering near death and dying may become withdrawn and begin to take little interest in current events and issues in the world. Therefore, a preacher who draws illustrations and stories from the morning newspaper may find that his message did not connect. What resource, then, does the preacher have to tap into to help his congregation connect and become listeners? For those who still have clarity of mind, their memory is the preacher's most valuable resource.

In an article titled *Venerable Preaching*, Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., said, "Older adults have a rich storehouse of memories and stories. But often it is this part of the body of Christ whose stories are ignored in sermons or, worse, stereotyped in a negative way."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 149.

⁷¹ William J. Carl, *Graying Gracefully: Preaching to Older Adults* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Pr, 1997), 91.

Jeter relates the following story as how memory can cause a sermon to connect with a listener:

I remember one occasion when my father and I were in church. The preacher was going on, and my father sat, apparently uninterested. The preacher then happened to mention something that had happened to him growing up on the farm. One of his chores, after the chickens had gone to roost on the rain barrel, was to pick them up and gently turn them so they faced inward. My father began to smile and then chuckle and then belly laugh. I looked at him. What was going on? I didn't find the story particularly engaging. But my father did. It brought back memories of his days on the farm when he had done exactly the same thing. It was part of his experience. And captured by the image and the connections the preacher made, my father was much more engaged with the rest of the sermon.⁷²

Writing about the great value of the use of memory in sermons, Fred Craddock says.

The minister will think through the importance of appealing to memory. The point here is not that one indulges in more nostalgia or sentimentality if the elderly are present. Memory is a powerful force in anyone's life, regardless of age. Memory gives identity and direction to life. There are all kinds of memories within us. There is the memory of our own personal history. There is the social memory of our family and our immediate connections. There is a national memory. There is a Christian memory. And there is a memory that can be called Adamic, that is, a memory that belongs to all persons simply because of their membership in the human race. Memory is the great, unused resource in preaching. To evoke someone's memory is immediately to have them listen with more complete engagement. Of all the faculties to which a preacher can appeal – intellect, emotion, and will – there is none to which the message can appeal more powerfully than that of memory. All great preaching has understood this.⁷³

This means the preacher, especially the young preacher, will have to perform historical research on the life and times of senior saints. This may make his preparation more laborious since it is always easier to write from personal experience; yet, if the preacher wants his message to minister, he will do the extra work. Preachers spend three years in seminary learning about the life of times of the people who wrote the Bible. This is done so that the preacher can properly get at the biblical idea being taught. Extra time

⁷² Carl, *Graying Gracefully*, 92.

⁷³ Payne and Brewer, eds., *Gerontology in Theological Education*, 157.

to research about life in America fifty or sixty years ago will enable the preacher to connect his message of hope with elder saints as they suffer.

Carl encourages applying the idea of using memory to that of language. We all know that a 22-year-old uses words and speaks in a way that is different from an 85-year-old. Also, someone who grew up in the south but who now pastors in the northwest will have a different dialect than his congregation. Carl believes that a pastor, without losing personal authenticity, can appropriate the language of his listener so as to acquire a better hearing: "preachers do well to season what they preach with bits of the vernacular familiar to their hearers to get and keep their attention and appropriation of what is being preached."⁷⁴ Carl elaborates further,

All preachers have language barriers to overcome or work around. As has already been noted, every year more and more preachers know less and less personally about the Great Depression, World War II, and even the turbulent 1960s and the Vietnam War, yet they preach to older adults who do. Obviously this creates a language barrier in terms of clichés, slang, and even the everyday prevailing vernacular, to say nothing about the character and type of illustrations used. The preacher who speaks out of only one time period is definitely handicapped. An older adult church member told an older minister finishing an interim pastorate just before a much younger pastor was to be installed, "My husband and I hate to see you go; you speak our language."⁷⁵

Language, then, can affect one's receptivity to a preacher's message. An immediate and simple way a preacher can use this insight about memory and language is in his selection of Bible translations. Many young preachers shy away from the King James, but a whole generation of Christians of all denominations studied and memorized Scripture using only the King James translation. A preacher who begins quoting the 23rd Psalm with, "Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need!"⁷⁶ may not get

⁷⁴ Carl, *Graying Gracefully*, 9.

⁷⁵ Carl, *Graying Gracefully*, 9.

⁷⁶ Ps 23:1 (TLB).

the response or hearing from those who grew up with, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."⁷⁷

Communicating to older Christians suffering through the multiple losses associated with the dying process has its challenges. To address and overcome those challenges, a preacher, particularly a younger one, has some specific homework to do. He must understand what suffering can entail, the needs that often result, and how to address those needs. He must search within the gospel message to craft a single main idea that speaks directly to those needs. Lastly, he must research and draw upon the memories of those who are suffering, and he must use the language of the suffering in order to offer the gospel's medicinal word most effectively.

The next chapter provides a practical, three-part teaching guide that can be used to instruct ministers how to communicate that medicinal word most effectively. The lessons draw upon the material in chapters two and three.

⁷⁷ Ps 23:1 (KJV).

CHAPTER 4

TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

So even to old age and gray hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,
till I proclaim thy might
to all the generations to come.

—Psalm 71:18 (RSV)

The following lessons are designed to build upon one another and together to constitute a single course; however, they can be adapted and taught separately if needed. The lessons are designed for approximately twelve seminar participants and are anticipated to take approximately 90 minutes each.

The purpose of the first lesson is to give the participants experiential knowledge of the nature and causes of suffering. The second lesson explains how a person processes suffering as he nears death and offers caregivers aids to address and minimize suffering. The third and final lesson provides participants with skills and knowledge to help them prepare biblical messages that will connect with older Christians and communicate a word of comfort.

Each lesson contains three resource materials:

1. An outline of the lesson for use by the instructor;
2. A handout of the lesson for use by the participants; and
3. A short quiz to be given at the end of each lesson.

The lesson outlines are not intended to provide every detail of the teaching event. It is assumed that the instructor thoroughly read and assimilated the material in

the previous chapters and gained a sufficient enough understanding of the content that he will be able to adapt the outline to his style of teaching.

The purpose of the handouts are to guide the participants during the seminar, give them a visual aid for the main points, and provide them material to take home for later use.

The quizzes are intended to motivate the participants to pay attention and to provide the instructor feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching event. The quiz could also be given as a pre-test to inform the instructor as to what objectives upon which he should focus his teaching.

Finally, a course evaluation form is provided in Appendix Two. The form is intended to be used after all the lessons have been taught. However, it can also be used if the instructor chooses to teach only one or two of the lessons. Like the quizzes, the course evaluation form is an assessment tool. However, where the quizzes assess the effectiveness of the teaching event, the course evaluation form assesses the participants' experience of the teaching event.

The author utilized the above plans for Lesson 1 and Lesson 3 at a seminar for pastors. His evaluation of the plans and his insights arising from the application of the plans are provided in Chapter Five. These conclusions may be of help for future instructors who teach the material.

Lesson One: How Physical Pain and Personal Loss Play a Role in Suffering

The goal of this lesson is to make participants aware of how suffering is related not just to physical pain but also to personal losses. In order to achieve this goal, the participants will be expected to fulfill four objectives:

1. Write down, from memory, Eric J. Cassell's definition of suffering as: "The state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person."
2. List at least three personal losses that can cause suffering for seniors near death.
3. Given Cassell's definition of suffering, briefly explain how a particular loss would be a cause of suffering.
4. Write, from memory, the three kinds of pain that cause suffering.

To do this, some or all participants will be given a prop that will simulate a loss with the purpose of inducing an emotional response. These props are used to simulate the losses many seniors endure as their bodies decline. For example, to simulate a loss of hearing, a participant will be given ear plugs or ear muffs. Suggested props include but are not limited to:

1. Ear plugs and/or ear muffs designed to reduce noise to simulate loss of hearing.
2. Safety glasses that have been marred and/or darkened to simulate loss of sight.
3. A cord to tie down the dominate hand of a participant to simulate loss of mobility due to a stroke.
4. An empty chair on the other side of the room for one of the participants to sit in to simulate separation and isolation.
5. A fake power of attorney for one of the participants to sign to simulate the loss of complete control over one's life (refer to the Appendix One for a copy of this prop).
6. A wheelchair to simulate the loss of mobility.

Lesson One Teaching Outline

1. Greet the participants and provide each with a moment to introduce himself.
Once everyone is introduced, inform the participants that, in just a moment, they can help themselves to some delicious snacks that have been prepared. Offer a brief prayer of thanks for the day and the opportunity to gather, and ask God to allow learning to take place.
2. After the prayer, distribute the props. Leave some of the participants without a prop – i.e., without an imposed physical loss. Those who receive a prop should receive only one. Though you could give more than one prop to one person, greater discussion is more likely with more participating.
3. Once the participants have applied their designated props, take a moment to thank everyone for their attendance and participation. Break the ice by telling a funny joke or sharing an amusing experience.
 - a. When you introduce the joke or story, speak loudly enough for all participants to hear you. For example, say loudly, "Let me tell you this great joke/story I heard today." Then, as you begin to share the joke or story, quiet your voice somewhat. Alternatively, you may quietly tell the group to laugh aloud as though you've just shared something hilarious.
The idea is for the participant who has ear muffs and the one sitting across the room to have the feeling of missing out on something good.
4. Invite everyone (except for the participant sitting on the other side of the room) to take advantage of the delicious snacks that have been prepared. The refreshments should be located a distance from the teaching area. Here the idea

is for those participants who have props that limit mobility to experience a measure of frustration.

- a. At this point, some participants may be confused or uncertain as to whether you are serious. Nevertheless, go on as normal. Lead the way and be one of the first to get a snack, all the while taking mental notes of how everyone is responding. You may chose to return to the teaching area and begin a brief portion of the lesson's introduction before everyone has been physically able to have a refreshment and be back in his seat.
5. Distribute the Lesson One Handout (except to the isolated participant on the other side of the room) and ask the everyone to get out a pen.
 - a. At this point, the participants may be getting restless and a bit annoyed, which is good. Good humor is an excellent first response, but the simulation needs to persist until the participants begin to experience a sense of encumbrance, frustration, or annoyance because of their prop.
6. Once frustration has set in, thank the participants for their willingness to engage in the experience and end the simulation. For the benefit of those who missed out earlier, tell that joke again and offer them a quick opportunity to get some refreshments.
7. Once everyone is again seated and order is regained, using the handout or Power Point, present Eric J. Cassell's definition of what it is to suffer: "The state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person." Ask everyone to write down the definition. Tell them that at the end of the

seminar there will be a quiz and that they will be expected to write Cassell's definition by memory.

8. Lead the group to analyze Cassell's definition in light of the effects of the simulation. This might be done best by breaking Cassell's definition into three parts – (1) "the state of severe distress", (2) "associated with events, (3) "that threaten the intactness of person." Examine through discussion how each part relates to the participants' experiences in the simulation. It may be helpful to dialogue with one participant at a time.
 - a. For example, take the first part of the definition: "the state of severe distress." You could ask the person who was wearing the ear muffs: How did you feel wearing the ear muffs? How would you feel if you had to wear them everyday? Why? In light of Cassell's definition, have the participant give a brief explanation of why a loss of hearing could cause a person to suffer.
 - b. Repeat this same conversation with each person who had a prop.
 - i. When you come to the person who had the General Power of Attorney be sure to read it out loud, emphasizing having the group identify losses involved therein.
 - c. Repeat Cassell's definition often. Have the participants repeat part or all as they make their explanations.
9. Pause and ask if there are is further discussion or questions.
10. Get feedback from those without props. What was their experience as they watched their fellow classmates struggle under their handicaps? Did they experience a small degree of frustration themselves? If some attempted to help

the others, ask them why they did so. For those who did not, ask them why not?

11. Ask the participants who used the props if they had any physical pain while handicapped. Using quotes and illustrations provided in chapter two, take a moment and explain why physical pain is not necessary for suffering to be present.
 - a. Suffering is as much, and perhaps more, psychological than it often is physiological. Rando's quote from Chapter Three about pain associated with childbirth would be a good reference.¹
12. Next, share the three kinds of pain that Cassell says cause suffering; overwhelming pain, uncontrolled pain, non-overwhelming pain that seems to have no end.²
 - a. Tell them to write down these types of pain because they will be expected to identify them on the quiz.
 - b. The purpose of this information is so they understand that, though pain can and does cause a person to suffer, it is not always the source of suffering for those who are growing closer to dying. Severe distress is caused by the losses they experience which threaten their sense of personhood.
13. Ask if there are any questions.

¹ Chapter 3, 36.

² Chapter 3, 35.

14. Distribute the quiz. Explain that the quizzes are both an aid to them and an aid to you, and that you will collect the quizzes afterwards to help you with your own assessment.
15. After providing enough time for the participants to complete the quiz, go over the answers with the group. Collect the quizzes for your own assessment.
16. Tell the participants that they will have a 15-minute break before the next lesson.
17. If this is the only lesson you will teach, thank the participants for their time, wish them well in their work, and conclude with a brief prayer. Distribute the course evaluation form and tell them they can leave once it is completed.

Lesson One Handout

Goal: To make participants aware of how suffering is related not just to physical pain but also to personal losses.

- Objectives:**
- 1) Write down, from memory, Eric J. Cassell's definition of suffering.
 - 2) List at least three personal losses that can cause suffering for seniors near death.
 - 3) Given Cassell's definition of suffering, briefly explain why a particular loss would be a cause for suffering.
 - 4) Write down, from memory, the three kinds of pain that cause suffering.

Must a person experience physical pain in order to suffer? Yes or No

Eric J. Cassell defines suffering as: _____

When pain is present, what are three kinds of pain that cause suffering:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Name at least three losses that can cause severe distress as a senior experiences as they draw near death.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Lesson One Quiz

(Please do not write your name on the quiz.)

1. True or False – All suffering is caused by pain?

2. Write down Eric J. Cassell's definition of suffering.

3. When present, what are the three kinds of pain that cause suffering?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

4. Name at least three losses that can cause severe distress for seniors who are near death.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Lesson Two: How People Grieve and the Needs of Sufferers

The goal of this lesson is to make the participants aware how a sufferer processes his experience and how a concerned caregiver can offer comfort. In order to achieve this goal, the participants will be expected to fulfill three objectives:

1. List from memory and in order the five stages of grief.
2. Identify three important needs that a sufferer has that, if met, may minimize suffering.
3. Determine which need a particular Scripture passage would meet.

In this lesson, you want stress to the participants that those who are suffering near death are going through a grieving process associated with each loss they are experiencing. Kübler-Ross identified five stages of the grieving process. Knowing these five stages will enable the participants to discern quickly the stage(s) of a sufferer, thus enabling them to make the most of their visit by ministering to the sufferer according to his experience in that particular moment.

A person who wants to minister to a person suffering near death needs to know what needs, if met, will most provide comfort. This way when they refer to Scripture, pray or give a short devotional they will be able to speak directly to the persons need.

Lesson Two Teaching Outline

1. If lessons one and two are not taught consecutively, the instructor should begin with the simulation used in Lesson One. The purpose of the simulation is not only to provide experiential knowledge of ways in which seniors suffer, but also to arouse those feeling and emotions that come with such losses. Once these emotions have surfaced, participants will be better able to participate in the lesson.
2. Ask each person that had a prop what losses they experienced in the simulation. The idea is to get the participants to recognize how one disability can be the cause of multiple losses.
3. Ask them how they would feel if those multiple losses were permanent. The idea is for the participants to understand why a person may have an extreme emotional response to an individual loss. One direct loss may cause many indirect losses.
4. Provide a brief history on the origins of *The Five Stages of Grief*.³ Give particular attention to the fact that it was initiated by a group of seminary students and assisted by a medical doctor. This may remove any prejudices or barriers someone may have to the research. They may think it is all theory or that it is has use only within a secular context.
5. Share, in order, the five stages of grief.⁴ Initiate discussion by asking at least one question about each stage. Before moving on to describe the next stage, ask if there are any questions.

³ Chapter 3, 40.

⁴ Chapter 3, 41.

- a. Denial
 - i. The person responds with "No, not me."
 - ii. Does denial have a purpose or benefit?
 - 1. According to Kübler-Ross, denial acts as a "buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses."⁵
- b. Anger
 - i. The person responds with "Why me?"
 - ii. With whom is the person angry?
 - 1. According to Kübler-Ross, "...this anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random."⁶
 - iii. For whom is this the most difficult stage?
 - 1. Family members.
- c. Bargaining
 - i. The person responds with, "I will...if you will...just this one time."
 - ii. What are the three components of a bargain?
 - 1. A prize for good behavior;
 - 2. A self-imposed deadline; and
 - 3. The promise that no more requests will be made if this one request is met.

⁵ Chapter 3, 41.

⁶ Chapter 3, 42.

- d. Depression
 - i. Using the material in Chapter Two, explain the two types of depression and the two different responses each require.
 - 1. Reactive Depression
 - 2. Preparatory Depression
 - e. Acceptance
 - i. What is a benefit of acceptance? Rest.
 - ii. Is the person happy? No. They are more calm, subdued and quiet.
6. From Chapter Three, explain three important needs that a sufferer has that, if met, will help to minimize suffering.
- a. The need for the personal presence of a concerned caregiver.⁷
 - b. The need to attribute meaning or benefit to the suffering.⁸
 - c. The need for hope.⁹
7. Have the participants refer to the Scriptures listed on the handout. Lead them in a discussion by asking the following questions:
- a. Why might the Corinthian passage minister to the need for the presence of a concerned caregiver?
 - b. Why might the Philippians passage minister to the need to attribute a meaning or benefit to the suffering?
 - c. Why might the Philippians passage instill hope?
8. Briefly review the lesson and ask if there are any questions.

⁷ Chapter 3, 51.

⁸ Chapter 3, 52.

⁹ Chapter 3, 59.

9. Distribute the quiz. After providing enough time for its completion, go over the answers. Collect the quizzes to use for your assessment.
10. Tell the participants that they will have a 15-minute break before the next lesson.
11. If this is the only lesson you will teach, thank the participants for their time, wish them well in their work, and conclude with a brief prayer. Distribute the course evaluation form and tell them they can leave once it is completed.

Lesson Two Handout

Goal: To make the participants aware how a sufferer processes his experience and how a concerned caregiver can offer comfort.

- Objectives:**
- 1) List from memory and in order the five stages of grief.
 - 2) Identify three important needs that a sufferer has that if met may minimize their suffering.
 - 3) Determine which need a particular Scripture passage would meet.

What are the five stages of grief.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

What are three important needs that a sufferer has that, if met, may minimize their suffering?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

(3)Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (4)who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (5)For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.¹⁰

Which of the three needs listed above does this passage address? How?

Philippians 3:8-11

(8)More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, (9)and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, (10)that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (11)in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.¹¹

Which of the three needs listed above might this passage address? How?

¹⁰ 2 Cor 1:3-5.

¹¹ Phil 3:8-11.

Lesson Two Quiz

(Please do not write your name on the quiz.)

List in order the *Five Stages of Grief*.

1. D _____
2. A _____
3. B _____
4. D _____
5. A _____

Circle the three needs a sufferer has that, if met, may minimize his suffering?

- A. The Presence of a Concerned Caregiver
- B. To Go Outside
- C. To Attribute Meaning or Benefit for the Suffering
- D. Hope
- E. To Be Left Alone
- F. To Take Care of Unfinished Business

Lesson Three: How to Engage Older Christians with God's Message

The goal of this lesson is to give the participants the skills and knowledge they will need to apply and communicate effectively a biblical truth to elder believers that are suffering. In order to achieve this goal, the participants will be expected to fulfill three objectives:

1. List the two components of an idea.
2. Write down, from memory, the two questions to ask in order to form an idea.
3. List the two resources seniors have that a preacher can appeal to so that his message connects.

In this lesson, you want to stress the importance of communicating one major idea in a sermon. You will then briefly explain how to form an idea. Next, lead the group in an exegetical overview of the Corinthian and Philippians passages. The purpose is to give them a sufficient amount of information about the passages so they can attempt to form a Biblical idea from each passage. Though they will not be graded on the exegetical portion, hopefully they will have two well developed biblical ideas to further build a sermon or short devotional.

Lesson Three Teaching Outline

1. Explain why it is important for a message to have a central idea.¹²
 - a. Seniors who are suffering need to hear a clear message. If a preacher doesn't know exactly what he wants to say, the listener will not know exactly what he said. This can be very frustrating.
 - b. Experts in communication and well known preachers all agree that a sermon should have at its core, a central idea.
 - i. Quote Robinson and Jowett from Chapter Three.
2. Present and explain the definition of sermon preparation as given in Chapter Three:¹³
 - a. "Sermon preparation is the formation and organization of multiple ideas that when preached communicate a single biblical idea."
 - i. Though a sermon contains multiple ideas, when preached, only one major idea should be communicated.
3. Ask the following question and allow the group to seek out answers: What two questions can a person ask in order to form an idea?¹⁴
 - a. First Question to ask is: What am I talking about?
 - b. Second Question to ask is: What am I saying about what I am talking about?
 - c. Explain that an idea is formed when you bring together the answers to those two questions. Offer this simple example:
 - i. Jesus wept.

¹² Chapter 3, 55.

¹³ Chapter 3, 55.

¹⁴ Chapter 3, 56.

1. What am I talking about? Jesus.
2. What am I saying about what I'm talking about? He wept.
- d. Offer another simple example:
 - i. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
 1. What am I talking about? What God created first.
 2. What am I saying about what I'm talking about? God first created the heavens and the earth.
4. Ask the group, "What are the two components of an idea?" Acknowledge and affirm any attempts to answer the question. Lead them, though, to the eventual answer: "Subject and Complement."
 - a. Explain that the answer to the first question provides the subject.
 - b. Explain that the answer to the second question provides the complement.
5. Ask the participants to apply the above understanding to the Corinthian passage in Chapter Two. Refer them to their handout and lead them in a brief process of exegesis based on the work in Chapter Two.¹⁵ It may prove helpful to provide photocopies of the exegetical material to the participants so they can follow along, make notes and take it home.
6. After the exegesis, ask the two questions that help determine an idea. Lead them in a discussion of why the biblical idea would minister to a senior suffering near death.
 - a. Ask the first question to determine the subject: What is Paul talking about? Affirm their responses. Then share what you interpret Paul to be saying and/or share the provided interpretations below.

¹⁵ Chapter 2, 8.

- i. How does God respond to our suffering?
 - ii. Why should God be blessed?
 - b. Ask the group the second question to determine the complement: What is Paul saying about what he is talking about? Again, affirm their responses and offer either your interpretation and/or the ones provided below.
 - i. He stays near to us and speaks words of encouragement.
 - ii. Because when we suffer he continuously comforts us.
 - c. Have them form the idea(s) by combining the two answers together into a propositional statement.
 - i. Formed Idea: When we suffer, God is with us speaking words of strength and encouragement.
 - ii. Formed Idea: We should bless God because he is continuously comforting us as we suffer.
 - d. Help the participants connect the idea(s) to the needs of older Christians near death by asking: Given what was said in Lesson Two about how the presence of a caregiver helps to minimize suffering, why might this idea minister to senior saint suffering near death? This is a bit of a repeat from the Lesson Two; however, having done the exegesis, the participants should be able to develop their ideas further.
 - i. The suffer is reassured that, even though they may feel abandoned and forsaken by others, God is always with them encouraging and strengthening them.
7. Repeat the above process for the Philippians text. Have them refer to the handout and lead them in a brief process of exegesis based on the work in

Chapter Two.¹⁶ Again, it may prove helpful to provide photocopies of the exegetical material to the participants. After the exegesis, ask the two questions that help identify the idea and, again, lead them in a discussion of why the biblical idea would minister to a senior suffering near death.

- a. Ask the group the first question to determine the subject: What is Paul talking about? Affirm their responses. Then share what you interpret Paul to be saying and/or share the provided interpretation below.
 - i. What is gained when we suffer earthly losses?
- b. Ask the group the second question to determine the complement: What is Paul saying about what he is talking about? Again, affirm their responses and share what you interpret Paul to be saying and/or share the provided interpretation below.
 - i. A closer and more abiding walk with our Lord.
- c. Have them form the complete idea by combining the two answers together.
 - i. Formed Idea: As we experience earthly losses, we can gain a closer walk with Christ.
- d. Help the participants connect the idea(s) to the needs of older Christians near death by asking them the question: Given what was said in Lesson Two about the need to attribute meaning to suffering, why might this idea minister to older Christians who are dying?

¹⁶ Chapter 2, 17.

- i. The sufferer is reassured that the suffering is not void of value.
The suffering is drawing them closer and closer to their Lord until they will want nothing but Him.
- 8. Armed with a biblical idea that can truly minister to a senior who is suffering near death, explain to the participants two resources they can use to make their message connect with seniors.
 - a. Draw upon seniors' memories.¹⁷
 - i. Seniors near death may not be interested in current events; therefore, the use of contemporary illustrations and anecdotes may keep the message from connecting. However, those who still have good memories (and most still do) will immediately connect when you use stories or illustrations from their history.
 - ii. This will require the preacher to research national and world events from thirty, to forty, to fifty years ago, but the work will be worth it when you see that your audience is listening to your message.
 - b. Speak seniors' language.¹⁸
 - i. While conducting research of past events in order to connect to a senior's memories, the participants should also take note of the peculiarities of speech from past eras.
 - ii. For example, a young pastor at a church dinner announced that parents with children have "first dibs." An older deacon

¹⁷ Chapter 3, 60.

¹⁸ Chapter 3, 62.

approached the pastor with a smile and said he hadn't heard anyone use the word *dibs* in years. It was vernacular from his era, and it connected with him and his memories.

- ii. Old movies and newspaper articles would be a good source for such information.
9. Ask if there are any questions.
 10. Distribute the quiz. After providing enough time for its completion, go over the answers. Collect the quizzes to use for your assessment.
 11. Thank the participants for their time. Ask if there are any questions over anything that has been taught. Tell them that you have a brief course evaluation form for them to fill out. Thank them again, and offer a brief prayer.
 12. Distribute the course evaluation form. Tell the participants that, upon completion of the form, they are free to go.

Lesson Three Handout

Goal: To give participants the skills and knowledge they will need to effectively apply and communicate a biblical truth to older Christians that are suffering.

- Objective:**
- 1) List the two components of an idea.
 - 2) Write down, from memory, the two questions to ask in order to form an idea.
 - 3) List the two resources seniors have to which a preacher can appeal so that his message connects.

How many central ideas should a message have?

- a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 1-2

Write down the two components of an idea and the question you ask of each component to form an idea?

1. _____

2. _____

What two resources do seniors have that a preacher can incorporate into his message so that it connects?

1. _____
2. _____

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

(3)Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (4)who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (5)For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.¹⁹

What is Paul talking about? — Subject

What is Paul saying about what he is talking about? — Complement

In your opinion, what biblical idea is presented in the Corinthian passage?

¹⁹ 2 Cor 1:3-5.

Philippians 3:8-11

(8)More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, (9)and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, (10)that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (11)in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.²⁰

What is Paul talking about? — Subject

What is Paul saying about what he is talking about? — Complement

In your opinion, what biblical idea is presented in the Philippians passage?

²⁰ Phil 3:8-11.

Lesson Three Quiz

(Please do not write your name on the quiz.)

1. How many central ideas should a message have?

- a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 1-2

2. Write down the two components of an idea and the question you ask of each component to form an idea.

1) _____

2) _____

3. From the lesson what two resources do seniors have that a preacher can incorporate into his message so that it connects.

1) _____

2) _____

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF TEACHING EVENT

Praise the LORD!
Young men and maidens together,
old men and children!

—Psalm 148:1 & 12 (RSV)

Originally, I intended to announce the seminar a month prior to the event so as to give pastors time to calendar it. However, the opportunity arose to move my anticipated graduation date ahead one semester, which required more expedient action and resulted in less notice for the participants; I gave myself only one week to announce the seminar and recruit participants. Fortunately, I had two excellent resources from which to draw.

First, my church is member of the Blue River-Kansas City Baptist Association ("BR-KCBA"), an association of Baptist churches in the greater Kansas City area. The majority of the churches are also affiliated with the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention. Member churches are located across two counties, some urban, some suburban, and some rural, and their memberships range approximately from 10 to 2000. The BR-KCBA is racially diverse and includes African-American, Caucasian, Laotian, Korean, Haitian, Hispanic churches, among others. Second, I am an active member of the Harrisonville Ministerial Alliance (the "Alliance") in Harrisonville, Missouri, where I currently serve. The Alliance is an interdenominational entity that collaborates to serve the local faith community through a food pantry and a thrift store. The Alliance membership is composed of pastors representing approximately seven

different denominations within our community. The Alliance, like our community, is not racially diverse: almost all of the Alliance members are Caucasian.

Seven days prior to the seminar I invited by email one hundred forty pastors in the BR-KCBA and fourteen pastors in the Alliance. Within two days, six ministers confirmed their intention to attend. Four days prior to the seminar, I emailed a follow-up to the same pool of pastors; four more accepted the invitation. In all, ten ministers attended the seminar. Originally, I had hoped for twelve participants, so, considering the short notice, I was pleased to have ten.

Demographics of the Participants

Seven of the ten participants are ministers within the BR-KCBA. Of these, four are full-time pastors, two are retired pastors and one is a youth minister. The other three ministers who participated are members of the Alliance and are full-time pastors: one from Church of the Nazarene; one from Harrisonville Christian Church; and one from Harrisonville Community Church (affiliated with the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches).

All of the participants were Caucasian, male, and appeared in good health. Their average age was fifty-four years old; two were in their thirties, two in their forties, two in their fifties, three in their sixties and one in his seventies.

I did not survey them regarding any personal health concerns they may have had, so it is possible that some are currently dealing with issues related to the dying process. Based on observation and previous knowledge of some of the participants, I can state that none relied on mobility aids such as wheelchairs or walkers; none used oxygen; and to my knowledge, none were visually impaired beyond what glasses or

contacts can remedy. To my knowledge, none are dependent on pain medications to reduce physical discomfort associated with an aging or dying process. The oldest participant, in his seventies, wore a hearing aid, which greatly diminishes the effects of his hearing loss and enables him to participate socially with minimal additional effort. This gentleman has also experienced, within the last two years, several hospitalizations regarding concerns about his heart; while he is currently experiencing good health and mobility, I would be very surprised if he is not already becoming well-acquainted with some of the losses and suffering associated with the dying process.

All but one of the attendees are married, their spouses are still living, and they live independently; *i.e.*, none require in-home health care and none live in any kind of assisted living facility. The unmarried participant has been a widower for three years. It does not appear that any of them are currently experiencing social death as it has been defined in this thesis.

Given that invitations to the seminar were sent on such short notice and to such a broad spectrum of pastors, I was pleased with the group's diversity of age, experience, and denominational affiliation.

Description of the Seminar Location & Lessons Taught

The seminar took place at Faith Baptist Church of Harrisonville in the Inman Fellowship Hall downstairs. The fellowship hall was completed within the last two years and is large enough to host one hundred people comfortably. It is equipped with a kitchen, restroom facilities and two separate classrooms. It is spacious, clean, well-lit and has an exit to the outside. The hall is rectangular in shape with the long side running north and south. It has no windows.

In the middle eastern half of the hall, four tables were arranged in a 'U' formation with the open end pointing east. The arms of the 'U' extended out at angle to enable the students to view the instructor and the PowerPoint presentation on the east wall. This made for easy and quick access to the restrooms (located behind the students) and to the kitchen (located in the southwest corner) where refreshments were provided. Also, if a student needed to excuse himself, he could do so causing limited distraction. The south third of the hall was arranged as it normally is for the church's fellowship meals, with six large round tables, each surrounded by six chairs. The north third of the hall was arranged as it normally is for one of the Sunday School classes and held fifteen black chairs in a circle. These three separate seating arrangements helped demarcate our seminar space in the middle of the hall, giving it a more intimate feel than it otherwise would have had.

I elected to teach two of the three lessons from the teaching guide: Lesson One: How Physical Pain and Personal Loss Play a Role in Suffering; and Lesson Two: When Preaching to Older Christians. I chose these for two reasons: I am most familiar with the material in these two lessons, and I felt that these two lessons were the most essential. At the very least, I wanted the pastors to leave knowing what suffering was and the importance of communicating a helpful Word of God with clarity.

Based on my speculations of how long it would take to teach both lessons and factoring in a break in between lessons, I had advertised that the seminar would take place from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. We chose to wait for a tardy participant and so began the seminar ten minutes late; even with that delay, the seminar was completed by 11:30 a.m. Each lesson took approximately one hour to teach, with a fifteen-minute break between lessons. Because it was my first time to teach the material, I was unsure

how long each session would take. I constantly watched the clock and felt more hurried than it turned out was needful.

Course Evaluation Surveys

Below are the tabulated averages from each question on the course evaluation form. The form asked the participant to rate on a scale between one and five their degree of disagreement or agreement with each statement. One is the lowest score possible and, as marked on the form, indicates strong disagreement with the statement. Five is the highest score possible and, as marked on the form, indicates strong agreement with the statement.

When passing out the evaluation form, I assumed that the form was self-explanatory and gave only brief instructions. However, at least three participants did not note that "Strongly Disagree" was associated with the lowest number, while "Strongly Agree" was associated with the highest number. This misunderstanding began to be clear to me only after the seminar's completion when I began assessing the evaluation forms. On the first question, one participant circled "1," indicating he strongly disagreed with the comment, "Meeting site was adequate in size, comfort, and convenience." He had then scratched out his original selection, written "Oops," and subsequently circled "5" instead. This notation caused me to reflect on the evaluation of another minister, a friend of mine; when he handed me his form, I had seen that he had circled "1" on every question. I smiled and laughed, but he didn't know why. When I later told him why I was amused, he said he had read the form wrong and meant to provide the opposite response. At his request, I relied here on the scores related to his clarified, verbal evaluation rather than those from his original, written assessment.

As I considered the corrections of these two participants, mentioned above, I noted that nine of the ten participants gave high marks for most of the questions. The tenth participant marked only "1"s and "2"s, with one "3." It may be that that person understood the form and gave an honest evaluation of his negative experience. More likely, however, given the other two misunderstandings, the person thought he was giving high marks when in reality he was giving low marks. Instead of throwing his evaluation out, I included it in the averages as though his responses accurately reflected his experience. Regarding whether "[h]andout materials enhanced course content," his response lowered the score by half a point. On all other questions, on average, his negative reviews, as written, caused no more than a quarter of a point difference. As a result, the average scores given below reflect the lowest possible reading of the evaluation results, but I do not believe that, even if this gentleman misunderstood the scale, as two others did, the results are negatively distorted enough to cause the results to be invalid. On average, the participants agreed strongly with each question; no one question received a score of less than 4.2. Overall, I am pleased with the evaluation results. The next time I teach, I will clarify the scoring system.

Table 1. Results of Course Evaluation Survey

	Average Rating
Meeting site was adequate in size, comfort, and convenience.	4.5
Course administration was efficient and friendly.	4.6
Course objectives were clear.	4.3
Course objectives were achievable.	4.4
Instructor demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of the subject.	4.3
Instructor encouraged questions and participation.	4.5
Handout materials enhanced course content.	4.4
Quiz questions related directly to what was taught.	4.6
Overall, I would rate this course:	4.2
Overall, I would rate this instructor:	4.2

A few participants provided the following hand-written comments:

- Stimulated thoughts and gave insight into ministering to the elderly.
- Enjoyed. Thought provoking.
- Timely subject. Well communicated. A benefit to participants.
- Caused thought and good interaction.
- Very well prepared.
- Very good experience.

Based on the evaluations and the comments, the content was of interest and value to the participants. It can be reasonably assumed that, if the lessons were taught by someone else who had a passion for the material, it would benefit his students as well.

Quiz Scores

I am also pleased with the participants' quiz scores. Out of the nine quizzes I received back from Lesson One (apparently one of the quizzes was misplaced), six participants got a perfect score, two missed one point and one missed two points. At least one loss of point occurred on all three because the student was unable to write down accurately from memory Eric J. Cassell's definition of suffering. However, each of the students did make an attempt and did remember part of the definition. More than anything I wanted the students to leave with that definition secure in their mind and am pleased with the outcome.

On Quiz Two I received all ten quizzes. Eight of the students got a perfect score. One missed one point and the other missed two points. The second question was worth four points. The student was to name the two components of an idea and provide the

question to ask of each component; *i.e.*, "Subject: What am I talking about?;

Complement: What I am saying about what I am talking about?" Both students listed the components, but one had no response for either of the related questions and one could supply only one of the questions.

For Lesson Two, I wanted the student to know what the two components of an idea are and what question to ask to identify each component. During the teaching time, I asked if anyone knew what the two components of an idea were, and no one raised his hand. That 80% of them scored correctly on that part of the quiz was very satisfying.

Self-Assessment

Given the time constraints for preparation, I thought the seminar went exceedingly well, and I enjoyed teaching the lessons. I was nervous but felt prepared and confident. I had created a PowerPoint presentation for both lessons, focusing on ideas I wanted to stress and on long quotes that contained examples or illustrations. One participant noted that it helped his comprehension to be able to see the quote as I read it. Additionally, I created a written outline for my personal use during the seminar, and I highlighted areas to remind myself of a related PowerPoint slide. This helped me by allowing me to have the information appear for the participants on the wall, while I could still face the participants with my outline in hand.

I was happy with my ability to reference additional material not included on my outline. Several times, I could tell from the participants' responses that more elaboration or an additional example was needed, and I was able to fill in these gaps

with information from memory. My familiarity with the thesis-project as a whole greatly aided me on such occasions.

Regarding Lesson One, I was surprised by the participants' reaction to the props intended to simulate various kinds of losses. I had hoped that the props, over some time, would elicit frustration from the students; rather, my good-natured pupils were quite amused. The students accepted their props and utilized them without opposition, and I anticipated some laughter as they did so, but at one point the participants were laughing uncontrollably. In particular, one participant approached the newly-hearing-impaired participant (the one given the ear plugs) and shouted his greetings to him with such amusement and force that all of the other participants couldn't help but laugh.

The only student who probably became frustrated with his prop was the gentleman whose "prop" was social isolation – I seated him by himself in one of the separate Sunday School rooms adjoining the fellowship hall until after refreshments. With the others clearly (and loudly) enjoying themselves, the separated participant really felt isolated and the sense of missing out.

In spite of the hilarity at the onset of Lesson One, after I collected the props and we began to analyze the losses in light of Cassell's definition of suffering, the men could really see how even a small loss can lead to severe suffering. The simulation set up the whole seminar, and I would not seriously consider teaching the material without it.

Next time, I will relax and slow my pace some. Based on the students' evaluations, I will more thoroughly explain the goal and objectives of each lesson. I still believe that the goals and objectives were mostly achieved, but as I reflect back, I did not intentionally read each goal and objective at the beginning of each lesson, and this would have allowed the students to better anticipate what we were trying to achieve

together. Also, though the evaluation form seemed self-explanatory to me, it became obvious, when used, that in the future I need to take time to explain the scoring system.

I had anticipated, after such an arduous struggle to fulfill this last portion of my degree requirements, the thesis-project, that my motivation for the teaching portion would be merely to have the project completed and be relieved of the anxiety and burden. It was a pleasant surprise and a fulfilling experience to find an additional motivation at work: I truly believed the material could make a positive difference in the lives and ministries of those who participated in the seminar.

APPENDIX 1

GENERAL POWER OF ATTORNEY

I, _____, hereby appoint _____
as my Attorney-in-Fact ("Agent").

I hereby revoke any and all general powers of attorney that previously have been signed by me. Including any powers of attorney that are directly related to my health care that previously have been signed by me.

This power and authority shall authorize my Agent to manage and conduct all of my affairs and to exercise all of my legal rights and powers, including all rights and powers that I may acquire in the future. My Agent's powers shall include, but not be limited to, the power to:

1. Open, maintain or close bank accounts.
2. Sell, exchange, buy, invest, or reinvest any assets or property owned by me.
3. Enter into binding contracts on my behalf.
4. Maintain and/or operate any business that I may own.

This Power of Attorney shall be construed broadly as a General Power of Attorney. The listing of specific powers is not intended to limit or restrict the general powers granted in this Power of Attorney in any manner.

This Power of Attorney shall become effective immediately, and shall not be affected by my disability or lack of mental competence. This is a Durable Power of Attorney. This Power of Attorney shall continue effective until my death.

Date: _____

Signature

State of: _____

County of: _____

Witness Signature¹

¹ Modified from, youth411.utah.gov/.../GENERAL%20POWER%20OF%20ATTORNEY.pdf.

APPENDIX 2
COURSE EVALUATION FORM

(Please do not write your name on this form.)

Please Circle Your Response to Each of the Following:

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
Meeting site was adequate in size, comfort, and convenience.	1	2	3	4	5
Course administration was efficient and friendly.	1	2	3	4	5
Course objectives were clear.	1	2	3	4	5
Course objectives were achievable.	1	2	3	4	5
Instructor demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of the subject.	1	2	3	4	5
Instructor encouraged questions and participation.	1	2	3	4	5
Handout materials enhanced course content.	1	2	3	4	5
Quiz questions related directly to what was taught.	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, I would rate this course:	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, I would rate this instructor:	1	2	3	4	5

Comments (positive or negative):¹

¹ Modified from, www.agd.org/files/education/pace/SampleCourseEvaluation.doc

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